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The American Diva:

Gender, Branding, and Celebrity in Cultural Industries, 1880-2020

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Michael Murray Reinhard

2021

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2021

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

The American Diva:

Gender, Branding, and Celebrity in Cultural Industries, 1880-2020

by

Michael Murray Reinhard

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Chon Noriega, Chair

This dissertation project, “The American Diva: Gender, Branding, and Celebrity in Cultural Industries, 1880-2020,” historicizes female popular music stars through the late 19th-century performance figure of the diva. My focus principally is on the transformations of the diva as a consequence of civil rights activism that marked the 1950s through the 1970s, a period that transformed vernacular cultural traditions, discussions around race, gender, & sexuality, and audience formations of U.S. media. This dissertation develops case studies of the branding logic of the diva historically through an engagement with early phonograph records, all-Black musical productions, the development of cable networks and MTV stardom, and the cultivation of gay & queer publics. In organizing this archive, I argue that scholars should view “diva celebrity” as a key investigative site for the public negotiation of identities, political expression, and commercialized citizenship practices. In turning to this figure, I explore how female music stars have been defined

historically—and been positioned by media production—in terms of their racial, gendered, and sexual identities. Through this examination, I argue that this positioning demonstrates a corresponding intertwining of political and consumer identities around notions of intimacy and identity. In doing so, this research synthesizes musicological, performance, and cinema & media studies by developing the social history of how the diva came to be emblematic of mediated constructions of identity, debates over civil rights, and new consumer movements within cultural industries.

Following Leo Braudy’s suggestion that fame is rooted in a period’s technological conditions, I track the diva as a central emphasis within larger historical shifts and audience formations in media industries. My work, within this landscape, moves beyond a focus on the politics of identity to think about these issues more historically by tracing the shifting technological conditions of how cultural identities have been industrialized by media production across the 20th-century. Tracking audience formations arising from the civil rights decades, this dissertation studies the diva’s shifting brand logic as central to historical shifts in cultural ideologies about identity, arguing that this performance history models the ways that media consumption has been intensified as a privatized citizenship practice within the context of neoliberalism. Using this approach, this dissertation elaborates on the myriad and even contradictory practices of self-authoring by which these stars broker their status as ‘public’ women in commercial media. This history, as my work argues, can be traced to the migration of the social intimacy associated with the operatic diva into new audience formations articulated through the rhetoric of cultural difference and new forms of public intimacy with culture. Thus, my dissertation provides a history of how a specific genre of celebrity has been used to increase intimacy with specific audience communities – often black, often queer, often female – and that this level of public intimacy is filtered through ongoing historical, industrial, and political debates in the U.S.

The dissertation of Michael Murray Reinhard is approved.

Kathleen A. McHugh

Ellen C. Scott

Timothy D. Taylor

Chon A. Noriega, Committee Chair

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2021

Dedicated to
Dad & Erin

&

In memory of
Katherine S. Reinhard
(1954-2009)

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It takes so many social, cultural, individual, and digital contexts to raise a dissertation. I am unequivocally indebted to them all—I, like many others in their filing stage, worry that I may have not invented anything here, merely synthesized. So, here, I must thank a great many people as the collaborators they revealed themselves to be. To those who remain suspicious of my humbled position, I thank you. I, too, remain suspicious of such well-balanced temperament. The

process of writing this dissertation has subjected me to repeated cycles of hubris and humility. Having undergone such unevenness, I find it imperative to risk being too genial and inoffensive for the sake of acknowledging the full extent of my gratitude. In all honesty, my thinking is the direct result of the company I have chosen over the past six years.

It would not be a proper graduate school experience without a certain amount of anxiety about the future. The support of my department has, thankfully, allowed me to avoid such deep-seated anxiety about the payment of bills in the present so as to allow me to properly focus on the necessary work required to turn my studies into a fully sponsored academic career. I count myself quite fortunate to have pursued my degree without the crushing amount of debt that many have cited as reasons not to pursue this path. I thank the generous contributions of UCLA's Film, Television, and Digital Media department for its myriad forms of support. During my residency, I have been blessed with the opportunities of working as a teaching assistant in the department and as a research assistant with Havas's Digital Research Group and the Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment. I thank the School of Theater, Film and Television's generous awards program for the Kemp R. Niver Scholarship in Film History and the Plitt Southern Theater Employees Trust Fellowship that allowed me the ability to carry on with my research. Additionally, I thank UCLA's Graduate School Division for their Dissertation Year Fellowship, as well as the Collegium of University Teaching Fellowship (CUTF) Program for their granting me the opportunity to develop my research in a classroom setting. With this generous support, my graduate school experience has left me feeling that I was given a real place of opportunity at UCLA. Few are given this path – I am immensely grateful.

A specific thank you to Nancy Jensen, Brian Clark, and Barbara Dube for their past administrative work in the department to make sure graduate students have a voice in our

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A warm thank you to Deborah C. Nelson who introduced me to the many hats that an academic must put on as deputy provost. I remember signing up to take your class on American Culture during World War II. Sometimes, I think what would have happened had I not signed

¹ Paul Gallico, *Confessions of a Story Writer* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 576.

up for that course. I'm sure that I'd be alive, but I wouldn't have been engaged by the work of cultural studies, nor would I have spent much of my final year of college enrolled in a Master's program writing about how cultural critiques of Barbie informed the camp aesthetics of *Clueless* (1995). Thank you, too, as another human being who did not laugh me out of their office but rather insisted I watch *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962) and read Susan Sontag to fully understand what camp and its aesthetics are. These gestures might have seemed small in the moment, but you allowed me the freedom to explore critical forms of queerness in everyday popular culture in an environment that was often loathed to put the inheritors of Benjamin and Adorno's critical traditions back upon the shelf. Thank you for encouraging me.

There were two other women who developed my studies significantly during my graduate year at UChicago. Hilary Strang, thank you for your compelling course on science fiction. I still use Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Russ's *The Female Man* (1970), and Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) in my research. Please do not forget that I owe you a signed copy of an Octavia Butler novel. And moreover, thank you for providing me strong guidance on my way out of Chicago. Your directness was valued. I would also like to thank Noa Steimatsky for being one of the model professors of my teaching in how to lead an engaging and rigorous discussion of texts *in conjunction* with my students. I still call upon our work in Realisms throughout my teaching. It was immensely valuable.

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I wish you knew that.

To all those mentioned and those not: if you read this dissertation, you'll hear our conversations. My replies are between the lines.

Michael Murray Reinhard

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Diva Celebrity: Branding Discourses and Consuming Cultural Citizenship

On April 14, 1998, Teri Hatcher introduced Gloria Estefan for her performance on VH1's "Divas Live." There, in part, to promote her recent film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), Hatcher spoke touchingly about the performer's biography:

Gloria Estefan is a shining example for everyone who's ever had to get through really tough times. She overcame a difficult childhood and grew up to become the most successful artist to blend Latin and American musical styles. When Gloria started working with the group that later became the Miami Sound Machine, she took the exotic rhythms of Latin music and fused them with classic American pop to create a unique sound that is totally hot and totally cool.²

Estefan had agreed to join the benefit concert much earlier than her peer-performers. Her appearance on the television special was part of the marketing efforts of her latest LP, *gloria!* (1998). For the performer, *Divas Live* represented a strategic stage to lend her name to its marquee. Styled in the same lineage as charity concerts popularized by Harry Belafonte and Ken Kragen's USA for Africa's "We Are the World" (1985) single, the telecast was marketed as a benefit for VH1's "Save the Music Foundation" that aimed to supplement music education in America's public schools. These charitable efforts were underscored in the telecast by images mostly of African American youth in PSA-style spots. These promotional videos for the benefit's charitable efforts framed the value of music education as a critical tool for raising verbal and math test scores. Positioned in a historical period where U.S. media frequently deliberated on the potential violence of rap music and its deleterious effects on America's Black and white youth, the evening telegraphed VH1's generosity to Black urban communities as part of its national, televisual

² *Divas Live*, DVD, Directed by Michael A. Simon (New York, NY: Viacom International, Inc., 1998).

presence. Teri Hatcher's perfunctory remarks on Estefan illustrated the specific form of multiculturalism that came to the fore in the 1990s that marked the evening and its relationship to a multi-racial and harmonious vision of the U.S. nation. This vision, not incidentally, was produced through the largesse of private corporate philanthropy and wealth, not governmental policy, for alleviating the tangible effects of funding crises for education. This national crisis, in part, traces its roots to those forms of structural racism arising from the political fallout of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in the accompanying withdrawal of public support for federal funding for schools. The enjoining of a female cultural address in the figure of the diva, forwarded by corporate partnerships, aimed to martial cable audiences to solve public issues in ways that generated positive press to these diva performers, VH1, and the music industry at large.

In a certain sense, VH1's usage of the term 'diva' deserves deeper interrogation here precisely as it relates to larger cultural and media industrial histories of the nation and how various technologies work to systematize and render broader categories of race and gender identities legible through the cultural narratives and discourses they gather. On this point, the telecast included the gender and racial markers about the diva's definition as a performance figure. Here, the diva's liveness, as promised by the special's title, was fulfilled by the dimensions of televisual production. The benefit's introduction started plainly: "Tonight live from New York City, VH1 Presents Celine Dion, Aretha Franklin, Gloria Estefan, Shania Twain, and Mariah Carey. Together on Broadway for one night only."³ Staged at the historic Beacon Theatre in New York, VH1's presentation of a diva brand erased genre specificity (like soul, gospel, or dance) as categories of distinction, preferring to frame the diva's significance through her global stature in the music industry. Jennifer Aniston, in her opening of the special, praised the performance roster for how

³ *Divas Live*, 1998.

“each have become superstars in different musical genres, and all five have achieved worldwide fame mixed with great talent and generosity of spirit.”⁴ Such introductory framings offer examples of what John Caldwell might describe as forms of industrial reflexivity “involving interpretive schemes... deployed within specific institutional contexts,” not only drawing upon audience knowledge of a performer’s fame but also reinforcing it.⁵ Gathering longstanding discourses about cultural consumption as progressive, the notion of this talent and generosity was directly aligned with the diva’s skill of bodily performance through her voice and physicality; at the same time, the diva offered a discourse about female genius and entrepreneurial self-authorship that dovetailed with the feminist empowerment themes of the 1990s. Mariah Carey seemed to embody these elements while being celebrated for her multi-hyphenated talents, as when Aniston remarked: “She was a superstar even before her nineteenth birthday, and she continues to develop her incredible talent as a singer, a writer, producer, and director. Here is Mariah Carey.”⁶

As reflective of its usage at VH1’s telecast, the diva embodied an archetype of celebrity built around not only the conditions of self-promotion in the music and global media industries but also a form of celebrity whose visibility in the cultural industries represented new imaginations and intimacies around the representation of racial, gendered, and sexual identities in these industries, as well. The telecast’s framing drew on these legendary divas as performers capable of representing the multicultural struggle of ‘social integration’ by overcoming the nation’s racial and gender divisions. Read in this way, the figure of the diva, through these performers, offered audiences intimacy with a post-civil-rights vision of the nation. This vision, in some ways, embodies what Josh Kun has referred to as “monocultural nationalist listening within the rise of

⁴ *Divas Live*, 1998.

⁵ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

⁶ *Divas Live*, 1998.

the “melting pot” school of American ethnic and racial theory.”⁷ This industrial naming of the diva, I argue, has its own history, and it can be studied through the development and transformation of cultural ideas about populism in the discourses of a highly-complex media industry that produces, self-reflexively, its own branded imaginations of iconicity, cultural visibility, and intimacy through an array of sonic, visual, and promotional texts. Within this textual archive, these branding discourses are integral for understanding the relationship between the political and cultural uses of identity in the media industries.

The diva, as a cultural form, reflects this broader history and, thus, offers itself as a genre of stardom that is one site among many of how popular culture since the 1960s has translated deep cultural divisions in American life through its promotional and branding discourses. According to the *Divas Live* producers, the telecast proved to be the highest rated program of VH1’s history with an estimated twenty million people watching the initial airings in the U.S.⁸⁹ A success for VH1, *Divas Live* became a repeated benefit concert for the network between the years 1998 to 2004 and 2009 to 2012, as well as a one-off holiday special in 2016. The benefit’s position within the larger function of the Save the Music Foundation led VH1 to boast their estimated contributions of “over \$11.5 million dollars in support to help bring music instruction to over 50,000 children.”¹⁰ The beneficiaries of these philanthropic efforts, children and students, thus, helped to highlight the quasi-maternal impulses of the diva on behalf of the children and the nation.

⁷ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 27.

⁸ *Divas Live*, 1998.

⁹ Subsequently, the live album recording was released later that year on October 6, 1998. Upon its release, *Divas Live* (1998) was certified gold in Argentina, Belgium, France, and Switzerland, as well as boasting a high position of #21 on the U.S. Billboard 200.

¹⁰ *Divas Live*, 1998.

Moreover, this figuration of diva celebrity illustrated decidedly populist elements, positioning the female voice as a powerful recognition of the complex and painful experience of racial oppression in the United States. On this point, the diva, emphatically, is a discursive figure in the United States that is positioned uniquely within forms of cultural production and aspects of political movements. The Civil Rights period of U.S. history did not invent this figure of diva-ness in media industry. This credit is owed all the way back to Edison's promotional uses of opera and serious theater to inscribe gendered visions of progress within the medium of recorded sound, at a time when such forms of entertainment seemed overly marked by the non-Anglo ethnic sounds of urban life. At the same time, there is no modern diva without the civil rights movements of the mid-century U.S. from its themes of anti-racism, contestation of women's public image, and new forms of queer visibility in national life. If Edison mediated the diva commodity as a path to cultural uplift and enlightenment in the early 1900s through discourses of serious listening, the mid-century U.S. transformed this commodity's capacity to ensure cultural consumption as capable of fulfilling new imaginations of social change. From cultural enlightenment to social change, perhaps, our forms of cultural consumption are not radically new than our grandparents before us, merely re-figured by emergent technologies, branding discourses, and cultural entrepreneurs like the modern diva.

Elsewhere, these types of rhetorical undertones can be observed in the implicit and cyclical address of cultural identities that marks the forms of branding in the diva's commercial appeal through a quasi-language of politics. Within the past ten years, the pop star as diva has come to be read as a cypher of feminism, gay rights, and anti-racism within the tensions and debates of national popular culture, whether one starts with Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone, move to Diana Ross, Bette Midler, or Cher, and end with Madonna, Beyoncé, or Lady Gaga. Franklin's inclusion

on the VH1 stage – and the subsequent *Divas Live* tribute to the Queen of Soul in 2001 – the TV special positioned its own telecast within the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement; recognizing in Franklin’s spirit and voice a possibility of representing *and* demanding respect by those marginalized in society. This point, i.e. the diva as a counterhegemonic figure, would pervade the criticism and journalism of the televised special. Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* suggested that of all the performers that there was “only one real diva onstage.”¹¹ He continued to describe the qualities of the diva: “a remarkable voice, a commanding presence, and a whimsical, imperious assumption of power. With Ms. Franklin around, the rest were only troupers.”¹² A month later, the *Times*’s Albert Innaurato would also seize on Franklin’s performance to assert, “Today there is only one true diva, and she does not stalk opera houses. Aretha Franklin has created what can only be called gospel bel canto.”¹³ This linking of Franklin with the opera’s term d’art—diva—had occurred since her popularization in the 1960s but had renewed after she had stepped in for Luciano Pavarotti to perform Puccini’s “Nessun Dorma” from *Turandot* at the 1998 Grammys.¹⁴ Through Franklin, the cultural history of the diva offers a nexus for older high cultural traditions like opera and the emergence of certain populist traditions in popular music as a site of historic redress for racial and gender inequality.

This lineage is reflected in the post-Civil Rights rhetoric of the *Divas Live* telecast in which elite celebrity entertainers aimed to address the issue of educational racism by taking up the mantle of female power in the music industry. These events occurred in the decade following public critiques, by cultural activists like Tipper Gore, of the music industry’s violence towards women

¹¹ Jon Pareles, “There Are Divas, and There Are Divas,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1998.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Albert Innaurato, “As Categories Blur, One Diva Rules,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1998.

¹⁴ Jim Fusilli, “Review/Recordings: Soul, Fury, Pathos, and Funk,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 1998.

through rap and rock music's misogynistic lyrics.¹⁵ The post-Civil Rights rhetoric can be further observed in the publicity language used to introduce the performers for the benefit. Such a dynamic was immediately observable in Susan Sarandon's choice of words in her introduction of Aretha Franklin for the benefit:

When Aretha Franklin was anointed the Queen of Soul in the late '60s, the word soul meant more than a music style, more than a person's spirit. That title was our recognition that her voice spoke and sang for all of us when Aretha demanded respect for all of those in society who had been denied it. From the turbulent '60s through to the challenging time of the '90s, Franklin's voice has been a shining beacon. She has earned from us the utmost R-E-S-P-E-C-T.¹⁶

Sarandon's words here do much to recall a continuous racial history of political struggle, placing the multicultural turn of the 1990s, evident in political rhetoric as well as the cable tv programming revolution that paralleled its usage, within the more turbulent, explicitly political battles over racial equality of the 1960s. In some senses, this enjoining of historical contexts – of the civil rights period to the post-1980s landscape – is a recurring one, frequently used to mark the historicity of the female performing body in the contemporary music industry. This re-framing, from political revolution to a consumer cultural revolution as embodied by the Divas Live programming, is an apt one for understanding how para-political language about social identity and its politics are subsumed into the values of the cultural marketplace. If neoliberalism has a cultural, in addition to political, history within the 1990s, its itineraries must intersect with the figure of the pop star as

¹⁵ Tipper Gore, "Curbing the Sexploitation Industry," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/14/opinion/curbing-the-sexploitation-industry.html>; Tipper Gore, "Hate, Rape and Rap," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/01/08/hate-rape-and-rap/b4c16c35-4e96-4dec-8866-68ff6c1350f4>.

¹⁶ *Divas Live*, 1998.

diva, due to her embrace of mediated constructions of citizenship. Her adjacent yet central stance within governance institutions in the U.S. is quite instructive for understanding the larger struggles over gender, race, and sexuality and the seeming public erasure of attention to class politics by media industry in the contemporary era. Excavating this genealogy of the modern diva and its relationship to contested ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality needs further attention in how the diva's branded visions of politics reflect the cultural operations of neoliberalism in which citizenship and belonging are displaced from the state onto commercial media.

Defining Diva Celebrity and Its Politics:

Acknowledging stubborn problems of classifying certain performers as divas, we can nevertheless begin by setting out some of the terms of discussion that make the diva as a cultural force significant as not just a dynamic in media culture but also a related topology of female power that has worked to shape discourses about gender and its politics. We might best understand divaness as a tendency or a collection of promotional practices that exploits intimate biography for the purposes of generating an authentic performer-audience connection. Of course, the diva is part of a long cross-cultural tradition that has well-established histories in a variety of media and cultural industries. Some of these are surveyed in Chapter One when discussing how commercial industry negotiated this figure's Europeanness and her emerging Americanness in the development of the diva commodity in the early 20th-century. In tracing this history, my work attempts to provide a genealogy of stardom and a cultural sensibility that migrated from high cultural domains like Italian opera into American mass media forms like film, television, and radio (or music more broadly) throughout the 20th-century. This latter phase of the diva's development places particular emphasis in the ensuing media industries environment of the postwar period and its rapid expansion throughout the 1980s and 1990s as digital transformations brought new cultural

opportunities for performers like Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan, Aretha Franklin, Shania Twain, and Mariah Carey as embodiments of political change at the first year of “Divas Live.”

This re-industrialization of the ‘diva’ figure reflected not only the music and television industries’ public relations battles, but it also signaled new mediations of gender, race, and sexuality within the shifting technological, political, and industrial frameworks of the United States in the 1990s. The telecast’s framing of the diva’s appeal is representative of a significant development in recent media in how popular music stars engage with their publics through an array of media production from music videos to live performances to biographic documentaries and now to social media posts and internet videos. Embodying new ideologies of self-display and self-promotion, this history, in part, can be traced to new forms of printing and photography within the landscape of the 1800s, but its modern emergence, perhaps, can be observed in the series of newsreels that promised rarefied images of figures like Sarah Bernhardt to international audiences. While music videos themselves also have longer histories that can be traced in their modern form to sound shorts produced by Hollywood in the late 1920s or more independent-minded productions of “soundies” in the 1940s, the promotional culture of music video and the intense staging of national publicness owe considerable debts to the transformations provided by television’s organizing of a youth audience for music industry from *American Bandstand* (1952-1989) to MTV (1981-Present). The diva is, of course, an ambivalent term whose associations with ideas about feminine excess and female entitlement pose timid grounds to provide a stable activist position for popular culture’s gender politics. At the same time, the diva has become a gathering term to describe entertainers whose vocal and physical performance embody what has been described by Lauren Berlant as a “spectacle of subjectivity” in her laying claim to the power of visibility

(culturally, politically, economically) in U.S. media culture.¹⁷ At the same time, there are clear limits to this visibility, particularly as enhanced public embraces of feminism in media industry obscure entrenched power differentials between women and men in the music industry, as well as between white women and women of color.

Here, the diva should not be treated *merely* as a model of female stardom for modern pop stars; rather, the figure should be understood as a celebrity performer who does not obey traditional genre or medium-specific categorizations, though she is deeply informed by historical associations between musical genre and social identity. These features do not tell the *whole* story of the diva's critical position in today's media culture, as her relevance to national life was achieved first in terms of her status as a figure of prestige in opera before she came to embody broader fights of racially integrated cultural industry from Broadway to the Metropolitan Opera House to Hollywood and to television. My troubling of medium specificity, here, hopes to recapture the broader cultural and political struggles that animated the public imagination of performers like Ethel Waters, Dorothy Dandridge, Marian Anderson, Diahann Carroll, and Leontyne Price among the other diva subjects of this study – imaginations that often re-figured the racial boundaries of genre categories, commercial industry, and casting ideologies in cultural industry. Other key developments have included the shifts in media production and consumption that have privileged the interactivity of audiences as dedicated fans and consumers of not only specific celebrities but their brands as well.

Acknowledging the economic productivity of diva fans, perhaps, has also paved the way for more explicit embraces of queer media addresses in popular culture, still informed by Freudian

¹⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.

accounts of sexual difference as they are. The salience of these new queer media addresses by diva celebrity reflects the re-calibration of hegemony in American society, as homosexuality, largely banned by Hollywood's organization of mass media through its Motion Picture Production Code, became seized upon as a representable subject within the corroding landscape of censorship in the post-war era through underground cinema/culture and the forms of market segmentation eventually offered by developments in magazine publishing and cable television. These shifts, in our more modern period, can be illustrated, partly, by the emergence of a whole range of celebrity gossip or sensationalist infotainment series on television such as *Entertainment Tonight* (1981-Present), *Extra* (1994-Present), *Access Hollywood* (1996-Present), *Hard Copy* (1989-1999), and *Inside Edition* (1988-Present), as well as the growing relationship between the music and advertising industries since the arrival of cable television.¹⁸ This explosion of celebrity interest – clearly not new when considering systems of promotion in the early 20th-century – both shapes and is shaped by a more competitive marketplace for celebrity. That these new forms of celebrity have seized upon societal disaffection and presented new forms of cultural belonging, perhaps, reflects a recognition of promotional culture's ability to embody discourses of citizenship that were forged by civil rights movements, just as the U.S. public has remained largely divided over these debates during the same period.

¹⁸ Later, the diva would become a useful rubric for understanding the culturally prevalent types of “catty” female behavior affiliated with reality TV programming, as stars like Tiffany “New York” Pollard were rewarded for their entitled and combative behavior onscreen in shows like *Flavor of Love* (2006-08) and spin-offs *I Love New York* (2007-08), *New York Goes to Hollywood* (2008), and *New York Goes to Work* (2009). On other cable networks like Bravo owned by NBCUniversal, ideas about commercial female agency became attached to the reality TV framings of *The Real Housewives* series across its many franchises in which audiences watch not only the TV antics of wealthy women but their attempts to monetize their exposure on the show into a fully-realized brand for themselves. The diva, thus, represents a genealogy of celebrity performance that underscores discourses of self-promotion and visibility in the public eye.

Designating the boundaries of the modern 'diva' can only be demarcated provisionally and quite problematically. The reasons are myriad but among them, the issue, firstly, is that not all women entertainers are themselves necessarily comfortable with the designation. At the initial *Divas Live* telecast, Gloria Estefan took one of her few speaking opportunities on stage to question the language of the event: "I don't know about this diva thing, okay? This little diva thing is getting out of hand, I think. If anything, I'm a *divette*."¹⁹ In 2002, Celine Dion expressed her reticence about the term during the Las Vegas version of *Divas Live*: "People think that people call me diva. ... I have no idea. Nobody has ever called me diva. Uhm... I don't know if I am. I don't know if I should be."²⁰ Skepticism towards the term, however, is unsurprising, particularly as 'diva' tends to refer to women pejoratively either for presumptions about the size of their body or by reductively characterizing them as unlikeable or entitled for their display of ambition, a clear re-articulation of tropes that place clear social and cultural binds on women performers. This re-claiming, partial as it may be, reflects the contestation over these very qualities in the new forms of celebrity produced after the arrival of MTV's transformation of music's youth culture address. Despite this resistance to the term, the diva's appeal, according to Alexander Doty, offers "a compelling brass standard that has plenty to say to women, queer men, blacks, Latinos, and other marginalized groups about the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and try to try and live that life on your own terms."²¹ As a figure who was produced by society's relative ambivalence towards women, the diva accepts her status as a public figure and sustains her own her stardom through highly-enumerated mythological and branding discourses that can be observed – at their most direct – in the interactions between

¹⁹ "Divas Live," 1998.

²⁰ *Divas Live Las Vegas*, DVD, Directed by Louis J. Horvitz (New York, NY: Viacom International, Inc., 2002).

²¹ Alexander Doty, "Introduction: There's Something about Mary," *Camera Obscura* 65, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2007): 2.

the diva and her audience at live concerts. Crucially, this project tracks this history of public intimacy in the textual addresses of celebrity branding and promotion to their directed audiences. In doing so, “The American Diva” hopes to understand the complex fusing of publicity and cultural ideologies that are generated out of such mythos that yield tangible global, political, and economic effects.

Diva-ness, now, as I use in this dissertation, is a logic of celebrity that is premised precisely on the challenging of formal and informal cultural boundaries. As Doty observes, divas trouble and break “out of their “proper” culturally assigned sex, gender, sexuality, class, national, ethnic and racial spaces.”²² Despite such “gender trouble”—as Judith Butler might describe the tensions between biological and discursive constructions of gender—it is important to think about how the diva’s boundary crossings are themselves framed, produced, and mediated by a range of cultural texts that render a celebrity’s public identity as authentic and intimate with her audience’s vision of politics, culture, and the nation. Attending to these discursive framings of celebrity is to follow what P. David Marshall refers to as the “intertextuality of the construction of the celebrity sign.”²³ Marshall’s recognition of this intertextual dimension of celebrity reflects the issue that while celebrities may be positioned predominantly in one media form, their star image is “informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumors and so on.”²⁴ The diva of this dissertation’s study, for her part, is directly insinuated into the production of intimate biography narratives that amplify her authenticity through and within various cultural ideologies of gender. These narratives should properly be considered forms of branding that circulate to her audience in live performances, film

²² Doty, “There’s Something About Mary,” 4.

²³ P. David Marshall, “The Celebrity as a Form of Cultural Power,” *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

roles, TV appearances, and endorsement deals. In this way, the use of certain forms of identity politics within the branding discourses of the diva – i.e. the use of publicity discourses to brand the diva within existing tensions and debates about gender, race, and sexuality themselves – are not separable from the conditions of commodification. Embodying what Sarah Banet-Weiser has described as the not necessarily political absorption of cultural visibility into media industry, the development of rhetorically activist visions of identity linked with practices of marketing points to critical dynamics in the ways that the cultural marketplace in the U.S. has come to satisfy political longings not satisfied elsewhere.²⁵ It is important to note that while such linkages are often excluded from discussions of what constitutes an authentic political process – authenticity here being placed in an oppositional binary with forms of commodification – that the diva does, in fact, trouble these boundaries, recalling directly that issues such as casting and hiring *are* labor issues. Thus, the modern diva’s performance of visibility has worked to achieve, in some sense, legitimate forms of social change, whether they may appear more imaginative than material. Crucially, this project recognizes that social change – difficult as it is to achieve and be recognized as such – is often made lasting when it is forged through advantageous coalition partners like media production.

The Diva and the Performance of National History:

Nested within the first telecast of “Divas Live,” various introductions of each performer worked to draw out the diva as the subject of historical significance. Sarah Jessica Parker’s introduction of Shania Twain stressed the Canadian-born singer’s relationship to celebrity and art as its own kind of frontier, a phrase that is a historically distinctive part of the American

²⁵ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Keynote Address: Media, Markets, Gender: Economies of Visibility in a Neoliberal Moment,” *The Communication Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015): 55.

imagination of individualism: “It used to be that Country Music had strict frontiers. But our next performer is a singer and a songwriter who with just three albums has set a new standard for country and pop music. No big wigs and no line dancing.”²⁶ The image of Twain as re-writing the rules of country music positioned her audience to recognize her own historicity as a performer in the media industries. Moreover, this centering of a kind of media historicity was also evident in the honors concert’s second year, wherein actress Sarah Michelle Gellar’s introduction for Cher, too, centered her legendary status: “She’s the only woman in history to have a top ten song in four decades.”²⁷ Such language not only illustrates the ways in which publicity discourses fuse together to imagine the diva as a figure of publicness with historical potential, but such pronouncements also work to assert history in industrial or capitalist terms, as when Gellar’s celebration of the performer noted that the singer’s “Believe” (1998) went “#1 in 23 countries and holds the record for twenty consecutive weeks at #1 on the dance charts.”²⁸ This song, in particular, has been notable for how it came to serve as the mythological comeback for the singer on the music charts following Cher’s extensive foray into film production throughout the 1980s. Recognizing this discourse on the performer’s comeback and endurance in the industry, diva celebrity illustrates how the language of publicity works to create historical value around the celebrity performer by emphasizing the maintenance of female agency in the commercial marketplace.

Moreover, the VH1 honors benefit also demonstrated the historical and cultural *work* that such figures hope to achieve in the public eye by navigating around social identity and its politics. Halfway through the telecast, First Lady Hillary Clinton appeared onscreen to the studio audience in a pre-recorded video with President Bill Clinton and VH1’s president, John Sykes. Their video

²⁶ *Divas Live*, 1998.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

appeared a bit irregular when compared to the mood of the rest of the evening. The video's production, carefully managed, offered the Clintons the opportunity to telegraph their work on behalf of the nation's kids. Hillary, herself, extolled the virtues of music education:

While most of us will never sing like Aretha Franklin or Celine Dion, education in the arts can help all of us reach our individual dreams. Research now shows that music education not only lifts our children's hearts but also dramatically increases their abstract reasoning, spatial skills, and scores on math and verbal exams. At a time when too many arts education programs are the first to be cut and the last to be added, all of us must send a clear message: when it comes to igniting our children's ability to learn and imagine, the arts must be just as central to our children's education.²⁹

Representative of liberal political coalitions of governance and private industry, the *other* president onscreen, John Sykes, took the opportunity to celebrate President Clinton's generosity:

When the president asked how he could help, I asked, 'Do you have a spare saxophone you could part with?' And he said, and I'm not joking, 'Sure, I think I've got one in the attic.' Well the leader of the free world is a man of his word, he is sending a message to millions of Americans by donating the most famous saxophone in the country. Hopefully, the rest of us will follow his lead. President, I always knew you had soul, now I know you have great heart, too.³⁰

The saxophone, of course, represented not only Clinton's explicit appeal to the youth demographic in 1992 via platforms like MTV but also how his appeal negotiated 'culturally Black,' i.e.

²⁹ *Divas Live*, 1998.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

perceived as racially authentic, signifiers around jazz on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989-1994). This mixing of political messaging around blackness and the youth demographic led various critics and supporters to label Clinton not only “the MTV president”³¹ but also more controversially, Toni Morrison would later declare Bill Clinton “our first black president.”³² Morrison’s words themselves were not literal, i.e. did not boil down race to issues of color and blood; rather, she argued that Clinton displayed “almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas,” whose investigations and convictions in Congress demonstrated a more than occasional lack of sexual and legal ethics at the same time it illustrated the presumption of criminality in which Republicans treated the president through various investigations as Whitewater and the Starr Report.³³ Bill Clinton himself spoke last: “I want to thank Hillary and John Sykes for their comments and to say how very pleased I am to help launch VH1’s Save the Music which is already improving the quality of education across our country.”³⁴

The year 1998, moreover, represented one of the worst political years for Clinton, as the details of his sexual scandals nearly culminated in his removal from office. A month before “Divas Live,” Paula Jones’ lawyers in the sexual harassment suit against Clinton published hundreds of pages in court that accused President Clinton of a pattern of sexual indiscretions and an elaborate

³¹ Writing in *USA Today*, Robert J. Bresler describes how Clinton’s position as a lightning rod in the cultural wars in U.S. politics meant that his designation as the first “MTV president” was a reflection of what alarmed culturally traditional and religious voters: “Religious conservatives see Clinton as the MTV president who rubs elbows with the Hollywood and Manhattan elite they consider responsible for an increasingly vulgar and sexually obsessed culture.” See: Robert J. Bresler, “The Muddled Meaning of the 2000 Election – Voting Patterns,” *USA Today*, January 2001.

³² Toni Morrison, “Comment: On the First Black President,” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 1998, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/05/comment-6543>.

³³ Toni Morrison, “Comment: On the First Black President.”

³⁴ *Divas Live*, 1998.

system of coverup that also included depositions from Gennifer Flowers and Kathleen E. Willey.³⁵ In January 1998, journalist Kevin Merida would write in *The Washington Post*: “What is it about President Clinton and women? Not the women he allegedly propositioned, groped and had affairs with during a quarter century in politics. But the other women of America who always seem to look the other way.”³⁶ The then-contemporary relationship between feminists and the sexual behaviors of President Clinton has been much studied and reflected upon in the intervening two decades, but there were few times, like the early spring of 1998, in which these issues of a political backlash to the Democratic president generated what Gloria Steinem called “the Clinton Question.”³⁷³⁸ Positioned within these events, *Divas Live* represented an extension of this Clinton question, as the president seemed eager to reposition himself as a friend to American women. Here, the telecast, thus, extended the public relations battle for President Clinton by turning to Viacom’s VH1, a sister network of MTV for its niche targeting of younger consumers as an effective form of demographic outreach.

The relationship of gender and race representation suggested by the telecast is deserving of more investigation than there is space here, but this model of presidential outreach around gender and race is situated around the development of coalitional politics in the U.S. that can be

³⁵ Peter Baker, “Jones Lawyers Allege Coverup,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/jones031498.htm>.

³⁶ Kevin Merida, “He’s Just Their Bill,” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/women013198.htm>.

³⁷ Gloria Steinem, “Feminists and the Clinton Question,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/22/opinion/feminists-and-the-clinton-question.html>.

³⁸ For a contemporary account of what was perceived as the hypocrisy of liberal feminists, see: Marjorie Williams, “Clinton and Women,” *Vanity Fair*, May 1998, <https://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/1998/05/williams199805>. Williams writes: “With very few exceptions, feminists were either silent or dismissive this time. “If anything, it sounds like she put the moves on *him*,” said Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash*. Betty Friedan weighed in, but only to huff her outrage that Clinton’s “enemies are attempting to bring him down through allegations about some dalliance with an intern.... Whether it’s a fantasy, a set-up or true, I simply don’t care.”

described by what Charles Taylor has termed “the politics of recognition.”³⁹ This rhetorical and political practice is premised on the notion that our experience of identity is partly shaped by the collection of discourses that mark our identities in public; thus, “a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”⁴⁰ It is partly this politics of recognition that has given rise to modern forms of identity politics that are rooted around the recognition – and celebration – of social and cultural difference. This politics of recognition, for Taylor, works to unsettle accounts of difference that homogenize the nation and mute the distinctiveness of certain social groups from one another around social lines.⁴¹ Nancy Fraser identifies this politics of recognition as somewhat separate from redistributive questions of justice due to its emphasis on “injustices it understands as cultural” are presumed “to be rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication.”⁴²

Stepping aside obvious questions about the authenticity of such racial and gender politics, this “politics of recognition” was on full display at the VH1 telecast. Celebrating women in the music industry for the purposes of a philanthropic outreach to urban Black communities also speaks to the activities of media industries to maintain their cultural legitimacy by attempting to recognize the network of individuated and collective identities of its audience. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the re-emergence of obscenity debates explicitly targeted not only pornography but music production (and music video production by extension). The net effect, on local

³⁹ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 38.

⁴² Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

ordinances and laws, exerted a greater influence of surveillance on the circulation and distribution of ‘black’ cultural forms like rap music. This cultural reaction was largely marked through fears about “gangster rap” that organized longstanding cultural anxieties about the sexual violence and supposed inherent criminality of Black male youth but also separately (yet mutually linked) fears about the sexual violation of white women.⁴³ Launched as the centerpiece of “Divas Live,” the Save the Music campaign’s efforts were primarily focused on solving issues of scarcity for public music education. Images of Black youth, however, were the dominant mode of visualizing those students empowered thanks to VH1’s efforts. In a certain sense, VH1’s positive images of Black youth might be viewed as an attempt at revising the public image of blackness articulated by music and television industry partnerships, though VH1 would later invest in black-centered reality TV that has attracted scrutiny over its problematic relationship to an archive of racial stereotyping.⁴⁴ At the telecast, VH1, a network that maintained an interest in music programming throughout the 1990s, thus, had taken on key public criticisms of the music industry and its association with rap music that had marked MTV’s own public engagements and politicking from earlier in the decade. VH1’s “Divas Live,” seemingly responsive to cultural backlash against the music industry, worked

⁴³ Former ‘Second Lady’ Tipper Gore would infamously pen an editorial for *The Washington Post* earlier in the decade, describing her fears about the deleterious effects of rap music on youth. See: Tipper Gore, “Hate, Rape, and Rap,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/01/08/hate-rape-and-rap/b4c16c35-4e96-4dec-8866-68ff6c1350f4>.

⁴⁴ Duke Professor Mark Anthony Neal would comment in the next decade: “The recent success of VH1’s “The Flavor of Love” has again raised concerns about the images of black folk that circulate in mainstream media. For many black audiences, “The Flavor of Love” is too much of a reminder of the racist and stereotypical depictions that blacks were forced to endure on television and in film for much of the 20th century. Thirty years ago, it was comedian Jimmy Walker’s portrayal of J.J. Evans Jr. that raised the ire of black viewers. In the early years of the post-civil rights era, Walker’s on-screen behavior disappointed many because of the belief that unlike the many black actors and actresses before him who had little choice but to take on often demeaning roles as butlers, maids and Sambos, he in fact had a choice to take on more positive roles.” See: Farai Chideya, “Skin Color, Stereotypes and ‘Flavor of Love,’” *NPR*, December 1, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6565127>

to produce a ceremony for the Save the Music campaign that appeared to celebrate and benefit some of the perceived victims of rap: women and Black youth.

In this way, *Divas Live* illustrates a critical way in which performers are martialled into complex systems of industrial signification that begin to resemble the intricacies of representing the nation through commercial media, in which an artist's performance takes on a reflexive role in the management of the audience's perception of media's social, cultural, and political allegiances. At the same time, the concert demonstrates how the diva as an industrial classification for types of performers has become central, in a certain way, to the articulation and media representation of the Democratic Party coalition. Obviously, the term diva is not a partisan designation, yet the relationship of divas to the Democratic Party is of note here precisely as it has come to reflect and seize upon politically liberal narratives around cultural difference. *The* subject of controversy, the re-emergence of the diva as an industrial term moved towards the center of national debates around racism, sex-positive feminism, and gay rights from the 1960s onwards and into the 1980s and 1990s at the same time the diva's global body insinuated itself into the many media-formats and technologies of the culture industries. This dissertation, in part, is designed to track parts of these histories as key defining structures for the relationships between celebrity, politics, and media audiences today by recognizing how the diva's performing body has come to discipline and inscribe cultural consumption with ideological meaning.

As I explore throughout this dissertation, the branding of these divas embody what Kobena Mercer has called "the burden of representation" or a set of extra-artistic issues when referring to public desires for representativeness that some marginalized social groups (and their self-identified allies) use as a partial rubric for evaluating art. As I show, these cultural allegiances around feminism, Black cultural politics, and LGBT-but emphatically gay rights were forged between the

1950s and 1990s but were shorn up by the ideological debates over the production and distribution of national media within the context of the 1980s and 1990s. In claiming this narrative, it is not my intention to assemble it so neatly by virtue of this dissertation's retrospective glance. This narrative is both observable and messy, particularly as industrial and political allegiances did not take predictable course. Tipper Gore, who made her mark on Washington D.C. through her pressure on labeling efforts in the music industry with the Parents' Music Resource Center, would later feature in the presidential administration most associated with the music industry's explicit awakening of its relationship to partisan politics, following the arrest of 2 Live Crew and the development of MTV's "Rock the Vote" campaign. Led by MTV, this awakening functioned to maintain a vision of civic engagement and public interest in their programming efforts but also to inscribe controversial music records and TV as part of a constitutional tradition of freedom of expression. To this point, Madonna would 'constitutionalize' her audience's embrace of sexual expression through an intimate connection with her music while being literally draped in an American flag, rapping to her television audience during the commercials at the 1990 MTV Video Music Awards: "Dr. King, Malcolm X, freedom of speech is as good as sex. Abe Lincoln, Jefferson, Tom – they didn't need the atomic bomb. ... Power to the people is in our reach ... and if you don't vote, you're going to get a spankie"⁴⁵ In the *New York Times*'s write-up, Robert D. McFadden would underscore Madonna's political symbolism as "the crucifix-and-lingerie pop idol who has rapped for people with AIDS, the environment and other causes."⁴⁶ Following this Rock the Vote ad, Madonna would later film the short, "The Diva," to promote youth voter outreach and political participation. Here, the industrial classification of diva as a figure of

⁴⁵ Robert D. McFadden, "Wrapped in U.S. Flag, Madonna Raps for Vote," *New York Times*, October 20, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/20/us/wrapped-in-us-flag-madonna-raps-for-vote.html>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

celebrity raises clear questions about its political effects and its cultural imagination for how it organizes the brands of these stars as commodified visions of intimacy and citizenship for their audience. In crucial ways, this dynamic represents the circumstances of cultural consumption as a refigured citizenship practice within the context of neoliberalism, providing both new forms of political coalitions rooted, often, in assimilationist politics of difference by cultural industry while representing the ways that global diva celebrity has come to inscribe itself within social marginalization, a troubling dynamic when considering the rise in inequality that has occurred during this same period.

The Diva's Brand and Its Public:

Retrospectively, VH1's *Divas Live* offered a platform for not only the branding of female stars but the branding of its cable network, too. Positioning the diva in terms of brand culture allows us to interrogate more deeply the ways in which celebrity idolization, fan loyalty, and identification can be understood in terms of intimate, national citizenship practices. Sarah Banet Weiser has explained that "a brand is the perception, the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, the essence of what will be experienced, a promise."⁴⁷ As Banet-Weiser points out, branding itself has its own history. In the mid-twentieth century, corporations intensified their recognition of the cultural value of their brands, as they worked to situate themselves as functional in not just emotional but economic and political ways, as well. Within this vantage, cultural consumption should be better understood as having its own relationship to social history, as greater forms of cultural polarization in the United States have increased perceptions of the role that certain media brands play in delineating the boundaries of self, community, and nation. In

⁴⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Brand," in *Keywords for Media Studies*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), 26.

Consumers and Citizens, Néstor García Canclini observes that the “exercise of citizenship has always been associated with the capacity to appropriate commodities and with ways of using them.”⁴⁸ Declining trust in political institutions, for Canclini, has created other forms of political participation as many “questions proper to citizenship—where do I belong, what rights accrue to me, how can I get information, who represents my interests? —are being answered in the private realm of commodity consumption and the mass media more than in the abstract rules of democracy or collective participation in public spaces.”⁴⁹

In terms of globalization and transnational media production, Canclini identifies the landscape of media audiences as one increasingly built on heterogeneity and social fracture, a related narrative to popular fears of “the balkanization of media” that Cass Sunstein has referred to elsewhere as “information cocoons” to think about the differentiation of media consumers into increasingly smaller target demographics.⁵⁰ The author’s larger point, however, is that the intertwining of citizenship as a cultural practice of consumption calls for an expanded understanding of national identity. In contrast to simple geographic boundaries of the nation, Canclini writes: “the definition of a nation, for example, is given less at this stage by its territorial limits or its political history. It survives, rather, as an *interpretive community of consumers*, whose traditional ... habits induce them to relate in a peculiar way with the objects and information that circulate in international networks.”⁵¹ To this point, Canclini offers an understanding of the nation as an interpretive community, a similar concept as Benedict Anderson’s examination of the nation as itself an imagined community; here, Canclini’s re-investment in this metaphor draws out the

⁴⁸ Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Cass Sunstein, “Neither Hayek nor Habermas,” *Public Choice*, Vol. 134, No. 1/2 (January 2008): 87.

⁵¹ Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens*, 43.

ways in which the nation is itself a textual and mediated phenomenon. And indeed, media has continued to receive this type of political charge. As Herman Gray also observes: “Where the state was once the primary site of struggles for civil recognition and social equality, the media remain the crucial site where different sectors of disenfranchised populations and communities continue to seek (and in some cases have achieved) recognition and greater visibility as a measure of cultural justice and social equality.”⁵²

Within her national signifying practices, the diva is not simply a female performer, as she has increasingly been positioned within systems of consumption in which her name and her relationship to her fans are viewed as having economic value in the form of her “brand.” Moreover, this idea of the brand requires more consideration of how national categories of gender, class, race, and sexuality are themselves translated and made legible into the language of consumer branding. Indeed, in *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, Sarah Banet Weiser argues further for an understanding of brand loyalty “as a particular kind of citizenship practice.”⁵³ In conversation, Banet-Weiser grounds Canclini’s idea of national identity as an “interpretive community of consumers” with an understanding of how networks like Nickelodeon organize the “flow” of their cable programming – via interstitial promos, ad campaigns, product announcements – to manage a “field of shared symbols about the brand, and loyalty” as “the ticket to membership.”⁵⁴ While Banet-Weiser examines the discourses of empowerment that are a central point of messaging in Nickelodeon’s global empire, the media culture surrounding the diva, as re-industrialized by Viacom’s other network VH1, produces and defines, in part, the potency of her cultural visibility in the marketplace as a particular kind of self-empowerment. The management

⁵² Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (December 2013): 781.

⁵³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

of empowerment and self-definition that emerges around these divas can be understood broadly through certain logics and rubrics of postfeminism, postracialism, and neoliberalism; at the same time, it invites us to interrogate the ways that branding practices of the diva crystallize key images and discourses of the nation and the various identity groups that comprise it. This crystallization takes shape through the establishing of authenticity and public intimacy via promotional material as music videos, documentaries, and the performative practices of social media engagement. In consuming these materials, forms of intimacy are generated out of diva celebrity within an intertextual network of signifiers that shape the diva's brand through national categories of race, gender, and sexuality, among other categories.

In this framing, acts of diva celebrity work to position audiences as a distinct type of public that is itself *branded*. In emphasizing this point, my project avoids common errors in studies of the relationship between media commodities and the notion of the public sphere that has been critical to studies of mass communications and democracy. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas examines the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, as it emerged in the eighteenth century. Its development was realized by new patterns of social organization through newspapers, other publishing industries, coffee houses, and public spaces or forums of public opinion. For Habermas, the public sphere represented an opportunity of private people to assemble and discuss matters of public interest. As an ideal, this sphere of civil society introduced, for Habermas, the notion of public good as a distinct phenomenon from private interest. Crucially, Habermas's concept of the public sphere offers a significant site of political mythology for liberal democracy, as this terrain privileges the display of reason through discourse as the foundation of democratic deliberation. In contrast, Nancy Fraser, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere," offers a 'critique of actually existing democracy,' an

allusion to her critique of the former writer's theoretically idealized concept of the public sphere.⁵⁵ Fraser's work interrogates Habermas's stressing of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere for how it makes its claim to be *the* singular venue of public discourse alone. Adding to discussions of scholars like Joan Landes and Geoff Eley, Fraser forcefully examines how this idealized concept glosses over the number of exclusions of marginalized social groups who are either legally, culturally, or economically barred from interacting in this idealized concept of the public sphere.⁵⁶ Seeming to speak to more contemporary accounts about the death of a national shared culture, Fraser critiques how the emergence of other publics has been treated by scholars as resulting in the decline of liberal democracy. Fraser argues: "This narrative, then, like the bourgeois conception itself, is informed by an underlying evaluative assumption, namely, that the institutional confinement of public life to a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy."⁵⁷ In making this critique, Fraser's work, importantly, reveals the inadequacy of such models of communications theory and democracy as Habermas's and, instead, emphasizes the enumeration of a multiplicity of publics and constituencies laying claim to representing aspects of the nation and nationality.

This corrective allows us to understand in a more nuanced way the counterhegemonic projects at work in media production and the ways that opposition to social and cultural marginalization are both commodified *and* distributed by today's media culture. Michael Warner, in "Publics and Counterpublics," offers alternative routes to understanding the nature of

⁵⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

⁵⁶ See: Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

⁵⁷ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 66.

‘publicness’ as it may ultimately make communications and cultural theory more legible for studying cultural difference.⁵⁸ His work starts with the outlining of three different concepts of the term ‘public.’ The first meaning of the term is as “a kind of social totality,” ranging from organizations of people as “the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community.”⁵⁹ For Warner, this sense of a totality, the very subject of idealization critiqued at length by Fraser, is brought out by the very act of speaking about the public. “There must be as many publics as polities,” Warner writes, “but whenever one is addressed as *the* public, the others are assumed not to matter.”⁶⁰ This first point is crucial for understanding the differentiation of civil society into a variety of different publics and their attendant counterpublics as one way in which different acts of public speech (i.e. publicity, for example) make claims to this sense of totality. Moreover, the second definition, familiar to scholars of media studies, includes “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public.”⁶¹ This sense of a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, “in common visibility and common action,” is one critical way that Warner moves into his discussion of the third meaning of how a public is positioned in relation to itself as an effect of how texts and their circulation position an audience to understand itself as *the* public not *a* public.⁶² Here, Warner crucially reconciles aspects of Habermas’s notion of the liberal public sphere and the critique of what Nancy Fraser saw as its rationalizing of “political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) the citizenry,”⁶³ by emphasizing how the representation of an audience as a public produces a series of erasures. These exclusions frequently parallel how political rhetoric draws upon the imagined but incomplete image of the

⁵⁸ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter 2002): 49-90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 59.

nation. In recordings of concerts produced for cable television and DVD/On-Demand viewing options, pop stars and divas regularly address their fans as a public through a range of different assumptions that are produced by a complex amalgam of personal branding, as well as audience and demographic targeting. Recognizing this notion of ‘publicness,’ as partly built on a competitive claim of representing *the* public and nation, this dissertation suggests that the publicity used to critically imagine and brand the idea of a diva’s audience as a particular kind of public allows us to critically interrogate the types of narratives and emotional intimacy centered and branded within various diva performances, monologues, and public appearances as themselves, partly, idealized claims about the image of the nation as a shared public that are themselves ideologically and culturally situated. In so doing, my work attempts to interrogate how the modern diva calls attention to her body as a ‘public’ one, represented in forms of promotional media and branding as a text like many others.

The branding of pop stars as divas, moreover, fits within a history of consumer culture that centers media producers as representative of larger social, cultural, and political tastes and lifestyles. Drawing on Wendy Griswold’s *Cultural Diamond* (2008), Kristin J. Lieb emphasizes how these brands can be studied as “cultural objects produced by creators, with inputs from both the social world and the audience that ultimately receives them.”⁶⁴ Her argument, here, is partly that “such brands thrive or wither based on how strongly they resonate with audiences.”⁶⁵ And moreover, her work tracks, in part, the intensification of this logic of branding by artists and music industry handlers. This circumstance reflects changes to the business model of the music industry as it navigated the expansion of the cultural industries from the 1950s onwards with the arrival of

⁶⁴ Kristin Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

television. These processes have run unabated particularly since the 1980s with the arrival of cable TV networks like MTV and since the mid-2000s when Silicon Valley companies have contributed to the glut of media platforms through which performers interact with their various audiences and publics. Recognizing the histories of these promotional practices in terms of national citizenship debates is one way of understanding how the self-reflexive aspects of an artist's brand work form part of the meta-cognitive practices of consumption.

Moreover, these changes have forced pop stars as divas to increasingly brand themselves for their audiences as “cross-capitalized empires who can generate vast amounts of revenue in a variety of entertainment verticals,” a circumstance observable by the mobilization of pop stars like Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, and Cher for television specials like “Divas Live.”⁶⁶ Identifying this new set of brand circumstances for pop stars, Lieb has insightfully drawn on the work of branding and marketing scholars about the nature of how these “person brands,” similar to the operations of publicity in the early Hollywood studio system, are constructed through media attention that increase exposure and therefore an artist's audience. Elsewhere, Arlene Dávila has looked at how the production of Latinx identity in the marketplace reveals “the global bases of contemporary processes of identity formation and of how notions of place, nation, and race that are at play in the United States and in Latin America come to bear on these representations” and, by extension, these public persons as entertainment brands.⁶⁷ Moreover, these meanings, as Dávila studies them, are shaped by “the discourses of authenticity engendered by this industry to defend the existence and profitability of Hispanics as an authentic and thus commercially valuable market.”⁶⁸ The U.S. media's system of personality brand management has incentivized pop artists to work within

⁶⁶ Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, 16.

⁶⁷ Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 3-4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

publishing, television, and social media industries, among other spaces, to embody such forms of racial and gendered authenticity and extend their media empire's financial returns by exploiting these authentic and intimate relationships with audiences. Within this system of cultural expansion, Lieb insightfully points out the changed organization of commodities in the music industry, concluding "music appears to be a tertiary concern in the construction of such brands, behind the core asset of their bodies and their secondary ability to succeed in multiple revenue-generating capacities, such as fashion and cosmetics."⁶⁹ As Lady Gaga has announced her queer makeup line Haus Labs during a period of drag's heightened cultural visibility and Rihanna's emphasis on constructing a better tailored cosmetics market inclusive of non-white skin color in Fenty Beauty, contemporary divas have illustrated the effects of the declining value of music by exploiting cultural authenticity to forge new brands and partnerships.

Studying the diva's performance of branding, by navigating and negotiating the promotion of different media personalities, allows us one way to understand how diva-ness came to be situated within new emergent forms of marketing generated out of the social unrest from the 1950s to the 1970s, as it became commodified in resulting shifts to cultural industries that identified new audience demographics around race, gender, and sexuality. These shifts mirror changes to national understandings of consumption that emerged in the postwar U.S., as tracked theoretically by Jean Baudrillard, among others.⁷⁰ Baudrillard, starting in the 1960s, developed tools of critical social analysis of the increasing significance and meaning of consumption in modern public life. Touching on this nationalist significance, Baudrillard draws out how consumption has been addressed as an act of citizenship, referencing Eisenhower's statement that a free government should encourage economic growth through the efforts of private citizens. Consumption as a form

⁶⁹ Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, 16.

⁷⁰ See: Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (London, UK and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016).

of patriotism was addressed, Baudrillard observes, in editorials of the period, as the Eisenhower administration's tax credits became viewed as the engine of economic growth and the satiation of private consumer desires.⁷¹ It is this historical context, partly, that Baudrillard uses to revise traditional Marxist analyses of the "use-value" of consumption, situating its social and cultural logic as not built necessarily on the satiation of needs but rather achieved through "the production and manipulation of social signifiers."⁷² This circumstance allows the author to conclude that the process of consumption may be examined through two lines of inquiry: "1. As a *process of signification and communication*" and "2. As a *process of classification and social differentiation*."⁷³ This latter line of inquiry works to explain how commodities (here studied as media brands and personalities) distribute "status value (overlapping with other social signifiers: knowledge, power, culture, etc.)."⁷⁴ The consumer society, as Baudrillard rightfully points out here, necessitates interrogation of how acts of consumption are themselves socialized, referring to the range of ways in which economic commodities are given exchange value through the ways that humans relate to one another. Baudrillard writes "the field of consumption is a structured social field, where not only goods, but needs themselves, like the various cultural characteristics, pass from a key group, a leading elite, to the other social categories as these 'rise' relatively on the social ladder."⁷⁵ It is partly the argument of this dissertation that diva celebrity, as a system of transmedia production focalized through branded personalities, works to create a structured social field wherein personality brands are produced through national framings of gender, race, and sexuality by the potency of the diva's media presence and performances. It is through these types

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 100.

⁷² *Ibid*, 80.

⁷³ *Ibid*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

of discursive framings that such forms of celebrity worship and identification become understood as vital forms of national identity and citizenship practices.

These circumstances, forcefully described by Baudrillard, help illustrate certain emergent logics in the period immediately following the Eisenhower administration's emphasis on acts of patriotic consumer citizenship as one way to find cultural and political belonging. In "Branding Consumer Citizens," Sarah Banet-Weiser has identified the succeeding decades as ones where cultural identities were 'parceled' into consumer identities.⁷⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s, new technological and media forms tapped into non-represented consumer groups within traditional strategies of mass culture, which in its youth culture variant targeted white male teens particularly. Banet-Weiser discusses how the introduction of cable networks as an opposition to broadcast networks were sold through ideas about individuality and creativity against the latter's system of mass conformity.⁷⁷ Through networks like Black Entertainment Television (BET), Nickelodeon, and MTV among others, cable TV, she argues, can be said to have "capitalized on struggles over visibility," a predominant terminology from various Civil Rights discourses of the previous decades, and linked such visibility with designated networks for underrepresented communities.⁷⁸ Here, it is precisely the claim of representativeness that works to situate the logic of changes to diva celebrity from the 1960s onwards. In acknowledging this phenomenon, Banet-Weiser rightly examines how consumer capitalism in the U.S. transitioned to "to a more affective relationship with consumers," a relationship born by advertisers' "acknowledgement of identity differences, which allowed them to position "authenticity" as a key component" of this relationship.⁷⁹ This

⁷⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding Consumer Citizens: Gender and the Emergence of Brand Culture," *The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 29.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 36.

circumstance, she argues, illustrates how the development of marketing has moved from a homogeneous mass-mediated national culture to media niches built around cultural authenticity that have expanded the relationships of cultural producers and consumers around ideas of intimacy, politics, and participatory engagement.⁸⁰ For this reason, Banet-Weiser explains that “brand cultures are not merely an economic strategy but are cultural spaces and often difficult to predict and characterize precisely. The tensions between a neoliberal focus on the individual entrepreneur and the continuing demands of collective cultures is one that runs through brand culture and shapes” ideas about cultural commodities.⁸¹

In providing this account, I have attempted to place a critical imagination around diva celebrity at the center of larger historical processes of our moment, including the impact of public discourse by cable networks and their audiences, the merging of aesthetic and political registers of public communication, the flattening of identity as a robust category of public and political analysis, the development of new commercial production and distribution models on the internet, as well as embodiments of a kind of media populism through the representation of an audience as *the public* and fandom as a related claim. For some, it may appear strange to incorporate critical theory following so much work in reception studies to position attention to the active audience and spectator. This turn, both through the impact of cultural studies and fan studies as a related field, has done much to work against the series of historical erasures that make preserving the material ephemera of subaltern cultures so difficult. Yet what perplexes me centrally about my object of study is how identification with diva celebrity and stardom is inscribed textually in commodities like live performances, biographic documentaries, and music videos; more directly stated, I

⁸⁰ Banet-Weiser, “Branding Consumer Citizens,” 38.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 37-38.

observe how fans and audiences come to appreciate divas using some of the very branding language centered across these promotional texts. This circumstance makes even ethnographic accounts of diva celebrity themselves potentially unstable sites of evidence. Writing on this very point, Joan W. Scott writes, “the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems.”⁸²

Within these images and discourses of publicness captured in these cultural works, we can study how the cultural figure of the diva in its relationship to women’s culture has absorbed the emotional, political, and cultural currents of the marketplace. Lauren Berlant’s work, relatedly, has charted the American political sphere as an affective space of attachment and identification, asserting the claim that women’s culture was among the first mass-marketed intimate publics in the United States of significant scale. Her diagnosis at the heart of women’s culture as an affective space of collective identification raises the central tension of its ambivalence towards the political; at once rejecting the sphere of politics as a space of corrupt abstraction un-anchored in the everyday problems of the community while articulating social problems as the site of intimate experience and shared knowledge. Despite objections to Berlant’s critical framings, her work remains deeply historically situated, a point that is crucial to understanding the intimate publicness of the modern diva. Studying this intimate public sphere, Berlant tracks the development of a reactionary familial politics as a central rhetoric of the Reaganite right. Underscoring this period’s historical transformation of public discourse, issues of intimacy – pornography, abortion, sexuality, marriage, personal morality, and family values – became no longer private matters; rather, as Berlant writes, they functioned as “key to debates about what “America” stands for, and are

⁸² Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer 1991): 778.

deemed vital to defining how citizens should act.”⁸³ In alignment with my focus on the diva in this dissertation, Berlant studies this conservative coalition for how she argues that it aimed to privatize U.S. citizenship by “rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture.”⁸⁴ Her work tracks the discursive effects of Reaganism as an anti-federal but patriotic nationalism that shrunk the state while intensifying identification with a symbolic notion of the nation, a mirroring of the ideological positioning of liberal media as signs of American diversity around gender, race, and sexuality. To this point, the positioning of divas within feminism, Black cultural politics, and gay activism draws on this culture-based concept of the nation as an example of how entrenched this privatized notion of citizenship is, figured in this dissertation as “integrated social membership” within the public address of media texts. It is this situation, reflected in diva celebrity, that secures precisely what Berlant describes as the “mass-mediated space of opinion formation that positions citizens as isolated spectators to the publicity that claims to represent them.”⁸⁵

Crucially, this dissertation seeks to map and track the presumption of this adversarial media address to American cultural conservatism as it has affected the language of cultural and political branding of diva celebrity. Moreover, in doing so, it is my hope to effectively track the forms of cultural and political citizenship that remain in deep tension within our own moment as they work to situate and naturalize new understandings around gender, race, sexuality, and class within a raucous and contentious media culture. Although cable news specials and other media forums like *Divas Live* may not seem deeply invested in ideas about the tense and deep work of political activism, there are ways that the program’s celebrities, in their positioning of their public person

⁸³ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 3

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

brands, encourage and produce a counter-hegemonic image of gender, sexuality, and race as traditionally expressed in mass media and culture. In the following chapters, I examine the tensions of this relationship as it was produced across an array of textual objects that work to brand divas as figures of social discourse and, thus, embody rich sites of discourse in the cultural field. Thus, I examine and consider how diva worship has become positioned within the social logic of consumption as an alternative form of citizenship practice in a deeply divided American political system and its relation to an equally differentiated marketplace for various audiences and consumer constituents. In doing so, this work positions an attention to the diva as a significant site in competing definitions of American national identity that are shaped by the contestation over cultural categories of social identity in the public sphere via ideologies of consumer citizenship.

Methodology and Chapter Summaries:

“The American Diva” investigates divas by looking at its figuration of female celebrity through the array of visual and sonic materials that function as its material archive. This project moves to recognize the braiding of popular culture and national politics in the publicity discourses of consumer culture. This investigation is itself a strange proposition as critical studies have typically focused on the authenticity of politics in popular culture, spending less time to consider these questions historically or as part of broader shifts in national life that “re-territorialize” minoritarian social identities into the language of the marketplace. Reading publicity critically *promises* a more effective engagement with how ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality are used to brand media industries as *culturally* avant-garde. The language of consumer branding, I argue, has a privileged but detached relationship to the political. This dynamic, moreover, has clear impact on how specific bodies and identities are marked *as brands* in public life and how they fit into the complicated system of culture and class in American society. This dissertation attempts to

provide an off-kilter approach that renews attention to the modern industry's slippages in its language around media and politics as reflective of a much broader class framing of consumer culture that has transformed during the postwar period.

This dissertation asks how it is that the diva has emerged as a meeting ground for the consumerist address towards historically marginalized social groups at the same time that the modern diva continues to occupy a central place of hegemony through her financial empowerment in the marketplace. These tensions in diva culture can be studied through fan studies approaches, of which are featured in this dissertation, yet they can also illustrate the co-option and adoption of industry discourse by its most impassioned consumers. Fans have complex relationship to media, that can be built on social contradictions. One representative example is a relationship to media and strong women that indicates a kind of latent feminist sentiment around re-configured tropes of traditional gender norms when the terms of this empowerment are predicated on aspects of glamorous self-presentation. Recognizing this circumstance also seeks to understand the complexity of modern female empowerment in media industry, particularly as stories of coercive (and racist) labor conditions for women continue to seep out through the trade press. Consuming the diva brand represents an audience's relationship to media that can be configured in many ways. Often enough, diva worship and diva fandom pose a highly contradictory relationship to female power. For example, certain stars are celebrated as embodiments of their audience's imagination of womanhood, particularly when one's preferred star is doing well in the industry. These very same audiences can *also* demonstrate reconstituted forms of misogyny. This dynamic frequently occurs when specific female stars have eclipsed a preferred one, thus posing a type of affective disturbance to an audience member's imagination of female celebrity.

“The American Diva” is a cultural studies project that analyzes the musical, textual, and branding or promotional texts of the diva using interdisciplinary work in critical theory, performance studies, critical race studies, feminist media studies, queer studies, media industry studies, and social theory. In this work, I aim to attend to the cultural address to various social groups and identities as constituted by consumer culture’s deployment of a nationalist address. Tracking this address reveals diva celebrity as an integral form of consumption and citizenship practice in today’s media industry. I argue for the need to examine how social movements, like feminism, Black activism, and queer resistance, and their assemblages have been reconstituted and reconfigured into the marketplace of American culture in its envisioning of mass media brands as *representative* of the nation and its ‘national culture.’

The earlier name of this dissertation, “Our Lady of Pop-Politics: Visions of Music Post-Feminism,” was instructive about the periodization of my project. The use of the term ‘visions of music’ is produced out of two interconnected uses. Firstly, the rise of music as a visually represented form grew in tandem with the Hollywood film industry and the network of ramifications produced by television in its granting of promotional and production opportunities for music artists. Some of these examples include talk shows (*The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971)), live performances (*American Bandstand* (1952-1989); *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959; 1977-79; 1989-1996; 2017—Present); *MTV Unplugged* (1989—Present)), variety shows (*The Judy Garland Show* (1963-64); *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* (1971-74)), televised awards shows (*Grammys* (1971—Present); *MTV Video Music Awards* (1984—Present)), talent competitions (*American Idol* (2002-2016; 2018 – Present); *The Voice* (2011—Present)), crossover television and music vehicles for artists/bands (*Josie and The Pussycats* (1970); *Hannah Montana* (2006—2011)) and reality shows (*Britney and Kevin: Chaotic* (2005)), among many, many others. The

development of television's use of performers matters not so much as an original point of the music industry's embrace of celebrity culture, but it reflects centrally how television has been key to branding performers within a complex system of global media production, promotion, and distribution. In many ways, television and its relationship to advertising – both in its direct and indirect forms – have allowed for a certain logic of cultural visibility as a consumer-oriented form of politics to be maintained around music stardom, wherein visibility often comes to function rhetorically in terms of media history and its relationship to various social groups. At the same time, visibility is also the bread and butter of a highly convergent media ecosystem, wherein cultural producers now regularly exchange their labor freely for such visibility and promotion in many less formalized media economies like podcasting, fan art, and others. Centering ideas and discourses about cultural visibility of a social group in positive terms has become one strategy, among others, for orienting an artist's brand to their audience as a public.

The second meaning in my use of the term 'vision' refers to its more active meaning as a verb (i.e. to imagine), reflective of a certain way in which music's capacity to reproduce the world through sound and image are imbricated critically with world-building potential. These worlds are, to be sure, commodified. From the rise of promotional music videos on MTV to the development of low-cost digital production that yielded an array of home video materials like recorded live concerts, the visual address of the diva has renewed the systems of promotion that invest in this figure as an embodiment of economic value through social and cultural signification. These discourses are on display at their most prominent in the types of mythology-building documentaries that have worked to raise the profile of not only cable networks like MTV (Nicki Minaj's *My Time Now* (2010) and *My Time Again* (2015)) and HBO (Beyonce's *Life Is But A Dream* (2013)) but also film studios like Paramount Pictures (Katy Perry's *Part of Me* (2012)).

The diva's body is, in some sense, visualized through these bricolages of texts that inscribe different forms of social value and currency for their audiences. For instance, the figure of the gay fan and his empowered relationship to the diva is often figured through visual texts like Perry's *Part of Me* or Wolfe Video's *For the Love of Dolly* (2006). These patterns of repetition offer clear instances in which the diva's stardom draws on a genre of language that privileges cultural visibility to mark out terms of personal identification with the diva's brand. These modes of identification, in my study, are frequently revealed to be linked with more redemptive and assimilationist narratives of American national identity.

The diva's archive depicted and examined here as a discursive and industrial network consists of promotional materials through which the performer—and her producers—author this public address. These materials have included magazine & television interviews, memoirs, music videos, televised award shows, social media postings, and authorized biography documentaries. In reading these materials as textual objects, I draw on work in celebrity studies that treats the publicness of stars as a mediated type of performance. Chris Rojek observes: “no celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public.”⁸⁶ These cultural intermediaries are typically an array of agents, publicists, trainers, cosmetic experts, and other types of administrative workers. Their task, as Rojek notes, is “to concoct the public presentation of celebrity personalities that will result in an enduring appeal for the audience of fans.”⁸⁷ With this insight in mind, the public visibility of divas as a specific kind of female star can be understood precisely through its aspects of audience and fan management and its relationship to managing key social and cultural tensions

⁸⁶ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2001), 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

in the image of the nation it provides its audience. The materials examined throughout this dissertation have been selected as an attempt to reconstruct the larger media contexts that surround the diva, a figure for whom musical and stage performance are largely central.

For many, this dissertation's studied texts may be classified as promotional or cultural detritus for their clearly commercial aims; in another age, Clement Greenberg would have called such texts kitsch or "academicized simulacra of genuine culture," I suspect, for their formulaic address of their publics.⁸⁸ Madonna's *Truth or Dare* (1991) and Beyoncé's *Life is But A Dream* (2013), for instance, both dramatize and center their stars as types of maternal figures and groundbreaking artists, illustrating a complex synthesis of traditional and modern ideologies of womanhood. Routinely, such biographic documentaries summon up the experience of fame as highly claustrophobic. These devices, however, are not incidental after observing their repetition across various texts. This repetition illustrates how branding texts attempt to yield a calculated effect upon their audience. In biographic documentaries, these branding texts tend to offer an embrace of feminine sentimentality against the pressures of a masculinized media industry. In other moments, gay fans and relationships are visualized on-screen as part of a linking of the diva with cultural ideologies of self-acceptance. These repetitive branding practices comprise one way that singers are gendered through branding as a self-authoring yet industrialized practice in media industry. Adorno, while discussing the standardization of music, links this stage of the cultural industry with the development of "pseudo-individualization." In using the term, Adorno critiques "endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market," despite the evidence of standardization that proves the contrary.⁸⁹ Adorno, here, appears to be making an

⁸⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 10.

⁸⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 203.

intriguing point about how standardized media production actively shapes and narrows the creative process in ways that are dissonant with ideas about the freedom of choice in the commercial media marketplace. Acknowledging these types of claims by more traditional critical theorists, the texts that comprise this dissertation's archive are decidedly commercial, but they remain no less valuable for what they tell about the history of the changing ideas about the diva and public constructions of social identity.

"The American Diva" offers a way of re-contextualizing common views about the quality of media production and distribution of media within the terms of American democracy. Many academic accounts of tv deregulation footnote the Reagan administration's attacks on the fairness doctrine under the guise that such fairness was a hindrance to the public interest. Within these common refrains, the news media's deregulation around the fairness doctrine is explained as precisely what has allowed for a greater polarization of Americans, as narrowcasting has erased a comprehensive understanding of opposing political views. This story is partially incomplete as it does not always explain in productive terms how the ensuing media ecosystem itself worked to maintain ideas about the public interest value of media. In contrast to these narratives about the decline of public interest, the production of media and its relationship to the public interest has intensified largely through emphases on the ideological potential and value of media production, as many citizens have come to expect media and its partners to justify their visibility in the marketplace according to their advancement of the public interest. It is precisely these attempts to justify an artist's public visibility through branding that illustrates the re-emergence of this type of consumer logic through the 1980s. The branding of this public visibility as authentic and intimate allows us to track, in part, the developments and roots of what some might call "cancel culture," the highly visible withdrawal of citizen support for public figures, as a historically situated form

of citizenship practice that contrasts the lack of consensus in American society over the legacies of the civil rights movements. Interestingly, this understanding can be observed *across* the political and ideological spectrum, as evidenced in the protests organized by Senator Jesse Helms against CBS in the early 1980s and the development of public interest programming to complement the production and distribution of music videos on MTV that have intensified using promotion/advertising to brand artists and performers as ideologically potent mirrors of the political world.

Reflecting on this history, this project seeks to excavate and understand how the diva's media history tracks, absorbs, and addresses these debates around cultural citizenship as an alternative form of political practice. Across this project's archive, the diva is imagined and configured as speaking, performing, and singing truth to power in highly visible assertions of self that appeal to the sense of the collective as embodied by the individual performer. As evidence for these issues, I have studied multiple domains of cultural production of the diva, from television to digital DVD production of concerts and fan materials to film to music video production, as well as cultural criticism from bloggers, fans, journalists, political organizers, as well as U.S. Senate committee hearings on music censorship. These materials are evaluated not just for the purposes of understanding a general history of the diva's branding through visual production but to also understand how this visual production records key and significant shifts in American society. By looking at changing debates and expectations of media, I examine how media production legitimizes cultural consumption as a potent act of citizenship practice. In tracking how the history of the diva draws on a cultural and political imagination of the United States, we are forced to engage more critically and productively with how the images of various social groups have absorbed not only a greater political charge through the act of cultural consumption but also the

ways in which U.S. civil rights movements have, in a certain sense, been abstracted and gentrified culturally through the realm of popular music. For this reason, one must examine the modern diva's history as a potent force where bourgeois class politics intersect with ideologies of anti-racism, anti-sexism, & anti-homophobia in the cultural production of the nation.

While writing this dissertation, the studies and critical focuses that made it into this project were a process of deliberative, not accidental, selection. Following Victoria E. Johnson's study of *Heartland TV*, I intended to interrogate moments in this cultural history of the diva that represented critical conjunctures. Johnson, in describing Stuart Hall, explains these conjunctures as historically specific moments "within which a critical network of discourses forms across political, institutional, and popular sites, engaged in working through a broader social dilemma."⁹⁰ Within this schema of analysis, each of my chapters analyze and examine moments in which the diva emerged as a central site in working out the image of the nation and citizenship ideals in the public sphere. By analyzing these conjunctures, it is my aim to understand how the diva has become mythologized through a set of discourses that make Civil Rights-era activism, with its various constituencies, coterminous with cultural consumption and investment in media as a legitimate form of citizenship practice. This process is achieved, so often, by the visualization of the diva, her individuality, and her public through the array of materials produced for her celebrity and stardom in the late 20th and early 21st-century due to innovations in digital production. It is my argument that the diva is a significant site of this national history of political polarization on the level of cultural brands – not necessarily for its neatness as an object or subject of cultural and political analysis – but in how the frustration of political and social hierarchies in the U.S. have

⁹⁰ Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2008), 21.

become ripe for a certain level of commodification as person-brands continued to promise a type of extra-political representation denied in more formal venues of political power.

Each of the singers profiled, catalogued, and examined in this project engage with the diva legacy on disparate terms that, of course, can and should not be reductively simplified; however, this dissertation does argue, perhaps convincingly or promisingly, for an understanding of diva-ness as a certain kind of archetype for female stardom whose promises to her public can help explain the negotiation of political and cultural visibility that we see strengthening throughout the mid-part of the 20th-century but has taken a renewed and deepened approach in our specific historical moment. In placing my attention to these conjunctures – where political, institutional, and cultural power intersect and are forged – I hope to track how American media, as a global system, configured its own types of populist appeals through its negotiation and attempted interventions in the imaginations of national hegemony. Looking at these pop stars or divas within the context of the nation, while following earlier work in cultural studies like Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Most Beautiful Girls in the World* (1999), also seeks to center how global systems of media production are legitimized by their branding through national discourses and practices of cultural citizenship, a dynamic that reflects the privatized renderings of national branding that Melissa Aronczyk has studied elsewhere on the governmental level.⁹¹

The studies contained in this dissertation work somewhat chronologically in terms of popular fields of cultural production, moving from the nascency of the diva as a cultural figure within opera and phonography to looking at how the diva migrated into Hollywood film production through how her figuration's promise of cultural uplift fit within emergent projects of middle-class

⁹¹ Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

cinema. From there, I look at how this discourse of cultural uplift became situated within the constructions of Black culture by dominant commercial industry from the problematic invention of “race records,” the development of the all-black cast Hollywood film musical, to the debates over the color line that marked the rise of television during the period of the Civil Rights Movement. Charting how these industries worked across different forms of medium specificity, I analyze the intensification of this model of transmedia stardom as it would become popularized within the context of MTV, a model of stardom clearly at work during VH1’s benefit concert. Through this context, the rise of queer and gay publics of the diva’s audience can be studied by looking at how the turn into the 1970s posed new audience formations that contested older mass media ideologies, a development that sees the rise of such performers as Bette Midler, Cher, and Lady Gaga from the 1970s onward who promised to synthesize cultural visibility for gay subjectivity within national culture. To end, I finish by examining the development of post-recession-era documentaries for how they organize the affect of class relations between the diva and her public as a critical archive for understanding new deployments of American class mythology within the context of rising income inequality. Through this consideration, I argue that these promotional commodities offer crucial lessons in the gendering of neoliberalism for their legitimization of wealth through framings of female economic agency and hard work.

My approach aims to underscore a consideration of the diva as a promise of celebrity across a whole range of cultural texts that are usually elided from critical analysis precisely due to academic objections to the critical value of these objects as having lower aesthetic value; reclaiming them here, not as emancipatory or liberatory forms of culture, is partially about understanding the ways in which media creates an experience of the nation that is given value through its critical and cultural framing for its audience.

Chapter One, “Americanizing the Diva: Opera, Recorded Music, and the Diva Commodity in the Early 20th-Century,” traces the origins of the 19th-century figure of the diva within its American context, to understand how her status became intimately connected to issues of national identity through vernacular debates about English-language opera. Moving from this point of entry, this chapter identifies how the diva is not only a historically rooted performance figure but also came to serve as a model of female celebrity within the conditions of the emergence of the phonograph and Hollywood recording industries. Using performance and sound studies, I trace the lineage of this model of diva celebrity through cultural discourses of serious art, and its management of urban ethnic tensions posed by early entertainments. Specifically, Geraldine Farrar, who would star in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Carmen* (1915), provides an example of this model of celebrity as a Metropolitan Opera House diva whose high cultural roots were useful within the emergence of the branding discourses of Victor Records’ Red Seal label. This branding drew on gendered rhetoric of domesticity and middle-class respectability within the representation of Farrar’s early sound recordings. These very discourses would be appropriated in the emergence of Farrar’s star image in Hollywood film production, as her promotional appearances in fan magazines worked to discipline audience readings of film as artistic. These appearances, as I show, occurred within the context of larger calls for cinema’s social reform by middle-class female activists of the period. Within this context, this chapter seeks to isolate the branding of cultural uplift in the diva commodity as it became signified within early recording industries of the early 20th-century.

In working through this history, **Chapter Two, “Charting the Mid-Century Black Diva: Performing Against the Color Line,”** shifts to compare the emergence of the Black female star within 1920s phonograph culture and Hollywood film as an example of the diva’s shifting activist

signification by the 1950s. Tracking the production of Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* (1954) by Otto Preminger, I situate how Dorothy Dandridge's portrayal of the film's titular role illustrates an enduring racialization of this performance figure through historical processes of the racial construction of sound, a dynamic also observable in filmic antecedents as Hollywood sound shorts of the 1920s and the developments posed by short video jukebox films of the 1940s. Noting discourses of racial liberalism at mid-century, I track the significance of the Black diva in figures like Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, and Diahann Carroll within this historical context as part of broader shifts in racial perceptions of art occurring not only in opera but also television. In considering this history, "Charting the Mid-Century Black Diva" recovers the intersection of the diva figure with the rhetoric of racial integration as fertile ground for understanding the ways in which more contemporary promotional media imbue the modern diva as having an interventional force in the history of (Black) women's media representation, thereby also reflecting how older discourses of cultural uplift, situated by early phonographic culture's position within the advertising culture of the early 1900s, echoed into new consumer ideologies of culture around race and gender within mid-century American culture.

Chapter Three, "Framing Sexuality through Censorship: MTV, the Diva, and Her Body's Politics," tracks the development of the diva's youth culture address, a critical dynamic for understanding larger industrial and ideological shifts in U.S. audience formations. This chapter contextualizes the figure of the diva within the landscape of music video production on MTV and its cable network. While traditional emphases about the representation of women in music video have typically emphasized its over-sexualization of women – of which the archive of MTV music videos is likely to offer such confirmation – I move to track the range of racial and geographic significations that were so central to the emergence of this gendered pro-sex discourse on MTV.

Here, this chapter examines the influence of MTV's cable network upon the figure of the diva by analyzing the influences of racial and sexual discourses in the gendered branding shifts that marked this decade. In particular, the form of diva celebrity that circulated around MTV, particularly through the figure of Madonna, illustrates how cultural narratives that surrounded white liberal feminism were re-situated within the image and branding practices of performers on the network, particularly as an array of music video texts from Cyndi Lauper to Pat Benatar mediated on the traditional patriarchal binds that restrict young women's media pleasures. This aspect of a latently feminist media production bled over into film properties that worked in relation to MTV celebrity and its cultural discourse as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) with its story of a suburban housewife trading lives with a downtown New York bohemian. This film text, particularly, does much to foreground the modern diva's implicit feminist signification around questions of female pleasure, sexual and racial anxieties of postwar-urban space, and media practices of counter-hegemony within a still-highly monopolistic television landscape of the 1980s. Representing the articulation of women's sexuality through racial discourse, one example is the case of Madonna's "Justify My Love" (1990) music video that became embroiled in culture war controversy over critiques of its sexual explicitness. This specific work continued the arousal of outrage from religious cultural conservatives and critical race theorists alike following her earlier music video "Like a Prayer" (1989) and its depiction of a lynching narrative and intimate embrace of Black religious figures. Other instances of this dynamic are observable in the performer's other video work as "Vogue" (1990) and "Erotica" (1992), which feature the same mechanisms of branding pro-sex media feminism through the masquerade of racial and queer difference.

Understanding the mutual articulation of gender and race within these discourses does much to recover the broader networks of signification that undergirded the modern diva's performance

of sexuality within the 1980s and 1990s. Developed within this history, I argue the significance of MTV's cable platform in terms of how it grounded diva celebrity within real and imagined histories of censorship that shape the ability of marginalized social groups to take up their own expressive voice and bodily agency. I ground attention to the perceived realness of these histories through debates around music censorship in the United States by looking at the Parents' Music Resource Center's record-labeling efforts. This cultural activism, starting in the mid-1980s and growing in force within the early 1990s, drew common cause with a broader racial imagination that viewed rap music as a site of violence against (white) women. Following this analysis, I illustrate how the Recording Industry Association of America responded to these censorship efforts by emphasizing the explicitly political valences of their musicians and launching wide-scale publicity operations through MTV's 1990 Video Music Awards and the subsequent "Rock the Vote" campaign. Within these efforts, MTV worked to discipline audience reading practices around the racial and sexual themes of its programming by re-signifying artists like 2 Live Crew and Madonna as under attack by political censors seeking to clamp down on their First Amendment protections. By examining this aspect of MTV's history, I work to explain how the sexualized performances of female stars were politicized through racial readings of the female body and how such framings worked to bring out the citizenship dimensions of MTV's media culture.

Chapter Four, "Industrializing Diva Worship: Audience Formations, Gay Fans, and Queering Consumption," examines the emergence of a brand-identified gay public in the diva's discourse by tracking this 'public' across three historical approaches to audience management. I put into dialogue a range of issues that the diva's stardom makes legible around the conditions of fandom as a form of self-expression within larger debates of cultural belonging and citizenship. Starting within the context of Classical Hollywood and its relationship to a gay audience, this

chapter recovers some of the under-examined legacies of film censorship. One underexamined aspect of this history is the displacement of homosexuality onto fan texts as central ways in which gay audiences were rendered “representable” by cultural industry. During this period, diva worship, moreover, was theorized under the influence of psychoanalytic discourse by its cultural critics, particularly as they attempted to explain issues of gay affinity with figures like Judy Garland through Freudian accounts of gender inversion. Moving from this period, I discuss the ways in which Hollywood’s mass media subtext shifted into subcultural style within the context of the 1970s. In this post-Stonewall period, diva figures more explicitly drew on the cultural capital of an emergent gay market. Figures like Bette Midler rose to national prominence through gay bathhouses in New York, as venue owners and promoters sought to capitalize on heterosexual fascination with gay male culture, due, in part, to the liberalization of censorship laws. Midler’s own subcultural capital, launching her into the mainstream as a gay star, migrated into the acts of other divas as the singer Cher. Understanding the historical articulation of gay identity through gendered metaphors in media industries, this chapter tracks the re-deployment of these narratives in NBC’s development of its gay programming through the emergence of *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Will & Grace* (1998-2004; 2017-2020). It is within this period that pop stars came to embrace negotiating their availability as gay stars, based on understandings of the consumption practices of gay men and the larger networks of class consumption, social tolerance, and the LGBTQ community that existed within the late 1990s and early 2000s. Identifying these queer and gay narratives about cultural identity as constitutive aspects of the diva’s branding texts does much to offer an understanding of gay publics as part of broader historical and political trends. In recognizing this context, I argue that such examples of the diva’s culturally forged brand relationships are significant for the ways in which they intensify privatized commercial practices

of citizenship by queering conceptions of cultural uplift. Through textual encounters, the diva's gay public points to the ways that ideologies of cultural representation via media consumption condition and intensify expectations of belonging outside of the state, a significant dynamic within the context of neoliberalism.

Chapter Five, The Postfeminist Diva: Economies of Visibility in Recession-era Biographic Documentaries, analyzes the cultivation of diva individuality through postfeminist rhetoric in the genre of biographic documentary. Appearing in full force since the 1980s, postfeminism has augured a latently feminist popular culture in its branded address to women and their empowerment that highlights a tendency to elevate, in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's words, "consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents."⁹² Turning on this formulation, I examine the commodified visions of gender that coalesce around the diva in Lady Gaga's *Five Foot Two* (2017), Beyoncé's *Life is but a Dream* (2013) and *Homecoming* (2019), Katy Perry's *Part of Me* (2012), and Taylor Swift's *Miss Americana* (2020). This chapter positions these texts within the historical aftermath of the 2008-2009 economic recession in their sentimental depictions of the diva as herself a laboring subject caught within the forms of gendered surveillance found in capitalist media industry. Making allusion to the feminist potential of their meritocratic success as gendered laborers and entrepreneurs, such documentaries can be studied as practices, texts, and ideologies that re-deploy, in Sarah Banet-Weiser's terms, liberal feminist discourse around "freedom, choice, and independence," and incorporate such values "into a wide array of media, merchandising, and consumer participation."⁹³ Through these branding opportunities, these

⁹² Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction," 2.

⁹³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism," *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2018): 153.

documentaries sentimentalize the tensions of being a woman in the media industries, working to legitimize and rationalize audience investment in these personalities by drawing on popular understandings of female professional precarity. By acknowledging these tensions, I explore how such postfeminist documentaries reproduce key class mythologies central to the meritocratic underpinnings of neoliberalism and position audience identification with female cultural entrepreneurs as embodied representations of feminist aspiration and feeling. Embodying longer histories of class fictions within the U.S., this commodification of gendered empowerment, I argue, should be read through larger structures of class crisis invested within diva celebrity under the cultural conditions of neoliberalism.

Thus, “The American Diva” issues a call to invest critically in the ways that diva celebrity, as emblematic of historical and industrial shifts, is an integral site for the contestation over the image of the nation. What is at stake in this project is not particularly the interrogation of “good” or “bad” forms of representation – this project does not probe particularly deeply into the ethics of female sexuality in the cultural industries, the authenticity of its avowed or disavowed feminism, or even the frustrating reproduction of racist tropes protected by discourses of the presumed individual agency of the top billed performer. Rather, this project sidesteps these specific questions of social progress to look at what histories are excluded by centering ideas about the authenticity of cultural politics. To this point, I remain ambivalent about many of the stars examined throughout this project, largely as I agree, in part, with dominant assessments by scholars of postfeminism like Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker that these images of female culture often work to re-align feminist politics and sentiment with certain logics of consumption and individualism. Rather, this project challenges us to think about the history of intimate culture requiring an authentic representation of the social identity within its management of national and public tensions. I, therefore, ask how it

is that media industries, through the figure of the diva specifically, have articulated this claim of representativeness in relationship to audiences historically.

While analytical interest in ideological culture wars has investigated the 1960s as a period of intense social conflict, one can observe the longer tail of its effects in the development of new media that became critical technologies for the depiction and imagination of national life for a variety of different social and ideological groups. This depiction of new claims about the image of the nation were frequently embodied by not only television programming but also the development of cultural brands for the diva herself. These ideologies of publicness observable in the branding forms that textually embody the diva's address has imbued her with a political potential that has situated consumption of her stardom as a latent form of political participation. Thus, "The American Diva" examines historical tensions between media and politics as it is imbricated in the national histories of the United States. While scholars have questioned the ongoing use of the nation as a critical tool of analysis for how it minimizes discussions of globalization and transnational media production, this project points to and raises conclusions about how ideas of U.S. cultural populism serve as critically public rubrics for the imagination of these global stars. Though the case studies included in this dissertation are not exhaustive – due to both limitations of space and time in the writing of this project – my hope is that the analyses contained herein will encourage other scholars to invest further in studying cultural identity as a discourse constituted by media industry itself that is pivotal to questions of national belonging in the contemporary era.

Chapter One: Americanizing the Diva: Opera, Recorded Music, and the Diva Commodity in the Early 20th-Century

“A history of what American women have done on the operatic stage in the last half century is, in a broad sense, a history of the progress in vocal art. There are always many who try to belittle the idea of progress, remaining faithful to the “good old times.” ... Fortunately these are not the opinions of the majority of the American people, else why would the standards of the Metropolitan House—an opera house without a peer in the world—have, in less than sixty years, been evolved from such crude beginnings as those of the old Park Theatre?”

--Charlotte Cowles, “American Women in Grand Opera” (1916)⁹⁴

“Opera recording served as the linchpin of phonographic promotions articulating democratic principles of an imagined universal access to the best of musical art. In this regard, the major recording labels promoted classical music, opera especially, by replicating discourse inaugurated in nineteenth-century cultural aesthetics combined with popular principles about self-improvement and public (democratic) education.”

--Richard Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity, Subjectivity, and Nature* (2015)⁹⁵

In 1880, Sarah Bernhardt paid a visit to Thomas Edison’s research labs in Menlo Park, NJ during a stopover in New York City. After seeing the facilities, she offered to record her performance of Jean Racine’s play *Phèdre* (1677) that had been earning her renown internationally for Edison’s new phonograph invention. Scholars have long noted how Bernhardt, recognized as one of the first international celebrities in the modern sense, bridges the system of fame of the old world built around an institutional-based system of patronage around notions of prestige, exclusivity, and the aura of liveness to that of celebrity in the 20th-century as organized by a consumer market by an array of media industries. As Susan A. Glenn writes on Bernhardt as a performance figure, “A capacious figure, Bernhardt was both a symbol and practitioner of the high art of serious drama, and a performer who aggressively exploited the techniques and institutions of mass culture.”⁹⁶ Bernhardt’s 1880 sound test, no longer extant, marks a genealogical point in the emergence of 20th-century celebrity, particularly as it illustrates the ways in which human

⁹⁴ Charlotte Cowles, “American Women in Grand Opera,” *Opera Magazine: Devoted to the Higher Forms of Musical Art*, Vol. 3 (January 1916): 10.

⁹⁵ Richard Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity, Subjectivity, and Nature* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 13.

⁹⁶ Susan A. Glenn, *The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

celebrity and virtuosity were inscribed into new technological systems of entertainment. At the same time, this sound test illustrates the ways in which older forms of art like theater and music—with their emphasis on aspects of liveness—became re-mediated into the two forms of entertainment that would dominate the early 20th-century: motion pictures and sound recordings.

Years earlier in the 1877 showcase of Edison's phonograph, *Scientific American* would speak directly to branding associations between technological genius and human virtuosity that would dominate early advertising of the new technology. Reporting on the developments of new patents, the publication would capture the technological uncanny posed by the new invention, illustrating the ways in which such questions would come to be inscribed into the new medium's search for fidelity in reproducing the human voice. Their showcase would note "the machine inquired as to our health, asked how we liked the phonograph, informed us that *it* was very well and bid us a cordial good night."⁹⁷ Here, this italicization of "*it*" would reflect open questions about the listening relations of the new technology that would play out in the organization of the first recorded sound industry. What exactly was this *it*? How did such technological uncanny come to be settled by the phonograph's situation within social relations as a humanized machine? In crucial ways, the diva represents a partial but nonetheless considerable answer to these questions, reflective of how the phonograph became situated as both a gendered and classed object. These questions, as I will later show, also echo in the early promotional work of Hollywood film industries in its development throughout the 1910s as it worked to manage the social tensions that its medium disrupted and then later contained. *Scientific American*'s write-up illustrates how the phonograph's listening relations would be asserted by analogizing mechanical reproduction to immortality, promising both an embodiment and transcendence of the human voice: "the startling

⁹⁷ "The Talking Phonograph," *Scientific American*, December 22, 1877, 384.

possibility of the voices of the dead being reheard through this device.”⁹⁸ Envisioning possible applications of the phonograph from reciting legal testimony to reimagining public lectures, this technological showcase would emphasize how the mythology of artistic genius was inscribed within recording technologies from their very beginning using the virtuosity of human talents in the high arts: “When it becomes possible as it doubtless will, to magnify the sound, the voices of such singers as Parepa and Titiens will not die with them, but will remain as long as the metal in which they may be embodied will last.”⁹⁹ Embodying these high cultural notions of art with uniquely civilizational claims about technological progress in the western world, Bernhardt’s recording, “her golden voice” (*la voix d’or*) as Victor Hugo is alleged to have called it, provides an entry point into the early uses of media technologies to extend and inscribe social systems of gender, live performance, and celebrity in the rapid re-industrialization of culture that would mark the decades from 1880 to 1920. In narrating this inscription, this chapter seeks to identify significant dimensions of what I term the “diva commodity” within convergent entertainment industries of the early 20th-century and how this commodity came to be embedded within the period’s social relations.

While starting with Sarah Bernhardt in a chapter entitled “Americanizing the Diva,” one consideration becomes almost obvious. Bernhardt herself was not American, having earned global fame in her native France, England and the United States. Traditional invocations from US based film critics and scholars of the actress have largely served to underscore her position in the development of middle-class cinema in the U.S.. In Robert Sklar’s accounting, this development of middle-class cinema reflected the success of imported Film d’Art films and their centering of

⁹⁸“The Talking Phonograph,” *Scientific American*, 385.

⁹⁹ “Ibid, 384.

literary adaptation production methods for companies like Jesse L. Lasky's Feature Play Company and Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Film Company.¹⁰⁰ This history, complicated in part by Victoria Duckett, largely privileges the actress's appearance in silent films as *Le duel d'Hamlet* (1900), *La Dame aux Camélias* (1911), and *Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth* (1912).¹⁰¹¹⁰² These traditional readings of Bernhardt occlude focus on the technological orientations of her emergence in film as part of a broader industrial situation of disciplining the cultural resonances and consumption practices of early cinema, let alone the emergence of the recording sound industry. As

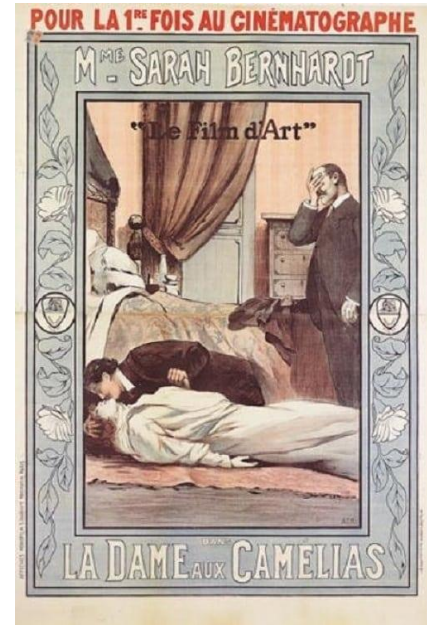


Figure 1: Film poster for Sarah Bernhardt in *La Dame Aux Camélias* (1911)

Duckett notes, when Bernhardt appeared in *La Dame aux Camélias* (1911) (fig. 1), the film's poster would emphasize both Bernhardt's name and the promotion of film technology most prominently, writing in red font: "For the First Time in the Cinematograph" ("*Pour La Ire Fois Au Cinématographe*").¹⁰³ Writing upon this film in the American press, *The Billboard* would describe

¹⁰⁰ Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994), 42-44.

¹⁰¹ Victoria Duckett, *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt: Performance and Silent Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

¹⁰² Extant titles from Bernhardt's film career include *Le Duel d'Hamlet/The Duel of Hamlet* (1900), *La Dame aux Camélias/Camille* (1911), *Les Amours de la Reine Élisabeth/Queen Elizabeth* (1912), *Adrienne Lecouvreur/An Actres's Romance* (1913), *Ceux de chez nous/Those of Our Land* (1915), *Jeanne Doré* (1916), *Mothers of France/Mères Françaises* (1917). See: Victoria Duckett, "Sarah Bernhardt," *Women Film Pioneers Project*, Columbia University Libraries, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-cqt4-pc13>.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Duckett, *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt*, 38.

AN EPOCHAL MOVE IN FILMDOM.

New York, Jan. 29 (Special to The Billboard).—It is the general belief that Messrs. Max Anderson and Henry M. Ziegler of the French-American Film Company, when they induced Mme. Sarah Bernhardt to appear before a motion picture camera, achieved a triumph that will mark an epoch in motion photography. The Divine Sarah appeared in a special production of Dumas' *Camille*, supported by her regular company of the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre, Paris. The pictures were made with astonishing success, and it is said that the story of the play is so clearly brought out as to require few written explanations to be projected upon the screen. The picture is in two reels and 2275 feet in length.

Mme. Bernhardt's monetary compensation for her services is said to have been over \$30,000. This is positively the only motion picture for which Mme. Bernhardt has posed, and she has stated that she will never again appear before a moving picture camera. Mr. Anderson scored another wonderful scoop when he prevailed upon Mme. Rejane, who is conceded by all to be the greatest comedienne on the French stage, to appear for his company in her world-famous characterization of *Sans-Gene*. This picture is in three reels, and is 3,075 feet in length. It is the intention of the French-American Company to sell the rights for both pictures combined, which will run about two hours and a half, thus making a complete evening's entertainment. These pictures should prove a sensation. The French-American Film Company holds the exclusive rights for North America.

Figure 2: "An Epochal Move in Filmdom," *The Billboard* (1912)

Bernhardt's appearance before the motion picture camera in similarly historical terms, "a triumph that will mark an epoch in motion photography" (fig. 2).¹⁰⁴ To this point, Bernhardt's career emphasizes the ways in which early film and phonograph technologies seized on older moorings of celebrity from theater, particularly in their billing of lead performers, as they sought to mirror the spectacle of live performance with that of technological mediation in ways that directly anthropomorphized and historicized early framings of mechanical reproductions of culture. Importantly, this billing did not simply reflect

the transposition of an older cultural form into the new; rather, such forms of advertising and publicity sought to reorient public conceptions of emergent technologies through the social significance of her mediated liveness through promises of exclusivity ("she will never again appear before a moving picture camera").¹⁰⁵ As Bernhardt became known for the virtuosity of her voice, the self-assertiveness of her stage presence, and as the corporeal embodiment of art nouveau, these same attributes became the promise of her presence as a cultural commodity *and* the medium of her performance. The rise of female performers, as Susan A. Glenn observes, underscored acts of self-assertion by laying claim to their capacity for spectacle and personality. Reflective of this expression of "new womanhood," Bernhardt illustrates, for Glenn, the roots of modern feminism on the theatrical stage through her strategies of self-promotion and self-display.¹⁰⁶ Crucially, it is

¹⁰⁴ "An Epochal Move in Filmdom," *The Billboard*, Vol. 24, No. 5, February 3, 1912, 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Glenn, *The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, 7, 12.

this gendered modernism that would become inscribed and re-mediated as commodities in the development of the phonograph and Hollywood recording industries. Thus, what makes Bernhardt so compelling an entry point into this notion of the “American” diva is for what she reveals about the rhetoric of early celebrity as fundamental to how media technologies would become situated in the American imagination through rubrics of gender, early notions of female empowerment, and the sensation of the commodified female body in modernity.

The diva’s capacity for self-display, perhaps, may seem like fraught terminology, evoking traditional concerns of women’s objectification by simplifying their subjectivity to their corporeality. At the same time, it is this corporeality – and particularly what has evolved to be the trademark of celebrity, the face, that points to the underlying conditions of a performer’s self-mediation. Pointing to this situation, Noa Steimatsky asks in *The Face on Film*:

But how has the technological and paradigmatically modern art of the time-based image, in its various forms, mediated this unique entity – this visual incarnation of the person with all its affective resonances, and with its mythical charge? How has the human face evolved as such a privileged locus, as a measure – even as essence—of the cinema, and how, in turn, has the cinema changed our experiences of faces in the world?¹⁰⁷

In an age where performers of various stripes take the reproduction of their likeness for granted, this early period of celebrity’s re-mediation through early film and sound technologies offers vital clues. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1913, Sarah Bernhardt subtly underscored what Charles Musser has described as modernity’s “fragmentation of the self.”¹⁰⁸ Talking on the occasion of her

¹⁰⁷ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Musser, “Conversions and Convergences: Sarah Bernhardt in the Era of Technological Producibility, 1910-1913,” *Film History*, Vol. 25, No.1-2 (2013): 166.

tour to the Pacific Coast, Bernhardt reflects: “It is easier for me to appear in vaudeville, as I give only one act or perhaps two each performance instead of a whole play. In addition to my matinee and night shows in the theatres, I have written 228 newspaper articles. Work pleases me and never tires me.”¹⁰⁹ At the same time, the article captures the shifting subjectivity of fame of the period, where phonograph and Hollywood recording industries reshaped the experience of modern national culture. Bernhardt describes her experience walking in Cleveland, where she came across this fragmentation through motion picture advertising:

I turned one corner and read a big poster, ‘Sarah Bernhardt in Tosca.’ Further on I saw that I was in ‘Elizabeth’ at another theatre and in ‘Camille’ at a third, so that with playing in ‘Une Nuit de Noel’ myself I was appearing in four theatres at the same time in the same city.¹¹⁰

Transformative but not radically new, celebrity became re-situated as a commodity of subjectivity through conceptions of public personae and personalities, facilitated by the mechanical reproduction of the human form—face, body, and voice—through the systems of publicity and advertising advanced by photography, cinematography, and phonography. To this point, new conceptions of self-display – the publicness of this personality *and* commodity vis-à-vis constructions of their likeness – situated networks of contestation over the meaning of this publicness within the very meaning of technological reproduction itself. As an article in *Talking Machine World* would conclude upon the signing of an exclusive contract with Edison to record some of her most famous performances:

¹⁰⁹ “Sarah Bernhardt Comes from Coast,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1913, 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

In this connection it may be added that the question of the future of the phonograph is, to a very great extent, involved. If the world's greatest actress can be induced to commit her voice to a phonograph record after so many lesser lights of the theatrical world have refused to be heard in a similar manner, is it not possible that her example may be followed by others with the result that the vast percentage of the public, who, because of location, are prevented from hearing the great theatrical stars, may be interested and a new avenue opened for the trade?¹¹¹

To this point, this feature of self-display, laying claim to one's own individuality and personality, was as much about the performance of human virtuosity in the arts as it was about the command over emerging public sensibilities and the negotiation of developing conceptions of spectatorship. With female actors being counted at 780 in 1870 to their explosion by 1920 at 19,905, as Susan A Glenn notes, the development of the modern female star paralleled the rise in female spectatorship.¹¹² Within this environment, the respectability of theater, particularly vaudeville, became a point of contestation as managers promised, however successfully, to eliminate immoral material from their shows, a classing of consumer culture also observable in the period through the phonograph's advertising of opera and the entrenchment of literary adaptation in cinema. Situated against the growth of a female audience, a representation of growing consumer strength of the period, this situation also echoed into public performances of selfhood in the press. In this same interview with *The New York Times*, Bernhardt transitions from her screen image to her public one, as she appeals to an emergent class sensibility over women's suffrage:

¹¹¹ "Edison Records by Bernhardt," *The Talking Machine World*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 15, 1910, 23.

¹¹² Glenn, *The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, 13.

I think it is a shame that women do not have the right to vote. They are educated and capable of understanding politics and the proper methods of government. I read that women in London are burning down houses and blowing up castles [sic]. Well, why not let them have the right to vote? If they are capable of controlling and operating commercial undertakings it is only just that the woman proprietor who has 50 or 100 men working for her should have a vote in the affairs of her country as well as the men she employs in her business.¹¹³

This comment came at a pivotal time in the history of the Suffragette movement and represented a reversal, in part, of Bernhardt's earlier comments dismissing the "Votes for Women" campaign. In the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* reporting, Bernhardt had always been opposed to the concept of woman's suffrage because "she thinks there are times when her sex isn't rational and she intimated that in her opinion the rioters in London are out of their minds."¹¹⁴ Previously, cinema audiences would have been treated to an array of anti-suffragette comedies, as Shelley Stamp notes, like *When Women Vote* (1907), *When Women Win* (1909), *When Women Rule* (1912) whose plots featured comedies of gender role-reversals where women learn the limits of their sex.¹¹⁵ Yet starting in 1912, suffragette groups like the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the Women's Political Union (WPU) turned towards motion pictures as a way of recruiting female movie audiences through films like *Votes for Women* (1912), *Eighty Million Women Want* (1913), and *Your Girl and Mine* (1914).¹¹⁶ Reflecting on this reversal, Maggie

¹¹³ "Sarah Bernhardt Comes from Coast," *New York Times*.

¹¹⁴ "Cheer Arrival of 'Sarah the Divine,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1912, 15. Quoted in Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 204; Charles Musser, "Conversions and Convergences," 156.

¹¹⁵ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 159.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 168.

Hennefeld notes how Bernhardt’s comment about suffragette property-owners represented an “attempt to elide class divisions within international suffragette movements, instead invoking suffragettes (at least aspirationally) as members of the property-owning class,” at a time when the caricatures of anti-suffragette ideology represented non-Anglo ethnic women.¹¹⁷ Crucially, as Stamp observes, movie culture reflected new forms of citizenship practices for women, reflected in the growth of female audiences through Hollywood’s fan culture. Within this context, forms of celebrity situated in such publications – diva or not – reflected the ways in which a growing public consciousness of women’s public functions would become channeled in what Erving Goffman might describe as the public-facing aspects of the presentation of self. Yet, in critical ways, the resources of this new celebrity were both fundamental to and larger than suffragettism, as the diva, embodied by Bernhardt’s talent and self-commodification, illustrated the ways in which celebrity became responsible for the social organization of masses into audiences from motion pictures to sound recordings to political coalitions. Embodying this reality, a 1917 newsreel would feature images of Bernhardt addressing a crowd of 50,000 people in Prospect Park, Brooklyn on behalf of the French-American cooperative effort in World War I, a not so unfamiliar dynamic to our modern times where divas like Aretha Franklin, Beyonce, and Lady Gaga are regularly invited to perform at presidential inauguration ceremonies.¹¹⁸

Traditionally, the history of media industries has been taught through notions of medium specificity, a critical lens that attends to the formal properties of an object of culture through the aesthetic specificities of its medium. In many ways, the privileging of medium specificity has served as one way to divide approaches to mass culture through an array of different academic

¹¹⁷Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent*, 204.

¹¹⁸ Roosevelt Memorial Association, Former Owner, and Theodore Roosevelt Association Collection. Sarah Bernhardt addresses crowd in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. [United States: s.n, 1917] Video. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mp76000157>.

disciplines and departments, typically erecting strong boundaries around literature, music, photography, and art. This balkanizing of cultural technologies from critical study is one way that prevents media studies from observing cultural movements across both the film and phonograph industries of the late 1800s and early 1900s. This balkanizing matters, moreover, for how it occludes significant analysis about the larger cultural changes posed, settled, and inscribed into early media technologies like recorded sound and motion pictures, both largely credited to the entrepreneurialism of Thomas Edison. Paying attention to the emergence of “the diva commodity” in early indications of media convergence across film, recorded music, and later radio and television illustrates significant aspects about the social relations organized into audience-going publics in the early part of the 20th-century. Observable striations in this historical record suggest how the development of competing entertainment systems in this period produced a golden age for the development of female celebrity and transformations in the cultural discourses that diva celebrity would come to embody. Here, Bernhardt’s interview illustrates the growing absorption of public-ness in acts of celebrity branding of the period as these performers organized audiences to patron new cultural commodities and media technologies. These new consumer markets also featured opportunities for divas to assert control over their public image through such acts of publicity and new forms of self-mediation. More than her technical skill of performance, the diva’s art, in her commodity form, was her ability to discipline crowds into meaningful coalitions, audiences, and publics; or perhaps, in some senses, the diva commodity offered the potential for individuals to identify themselves as belonging to a specific audience formation situated within a variety of political and cultural relations. While this aspect of cultural citizenship has often been described as belonging for an audience or spectator, it might be better to think of this, in terms of a diva’s performance, as her capacity to define and situate her body within preferred reception

contexts. To this point, Bernhardt's reversal of her views on the suffragette movement, written through the terms of personal disclosure or interior self-display, represents part of the larger dynamics that have dominated this period of early media industry, which is over the rising ability for female performers to take ownership over their image or voice through new forms of media industry. Tracking these historical shifts in the branding of celebrity and cultural commodities provides a compelling window into social questions of the period that significantly inform more modern conditions of media consumer culture.

In this chapter, I chart alternative pathways to the study of the diva by turning back towards this 19th-century figure to examine how she became industrialized into an identifiable commodity form within the emergence of new media industries of the early 20th-century. While this figure became available for new forms of nationalist identity in the U.S. through vernacular debates about English-language opera, her position in music culture of the period organized discourses of cultural uplift that became situated as part of the defining consumer relations of the early phonograph industry. Using performance, sound, and star studies, I examine the re-mediation of these cultural discourses in the figure of the diva through the emergence of her commodity form in early Hollywood's middle-classing of the feature film through specific notions of art. Specifically, Geraldine Farrar, who would star in Cecil B. DeMille's *Carmen* (1915), provides an example of this model of celebrity as a Metropolitan Opera House diva. Her high cultural roots were useful within the emergence of the branding discourses of Victor Records' Red Seal label that drew on gendered rhetoric of domesticity and middle-class respectability within the representation of Farrar's early sound recordings. The disciplining of music consumption through these discourses of cultural uplift illustrates, partly, the ways in which the emergent record industry drew upon extant practices of advertising and marketing, as Pamela Walker Laird and others have pointed

out, “in articulating and shaping the available definitions of progress.”¹¹⁹ These very discourses about progress, particularly about the cinematic medium, would be appropriated in the emergence of Farrar’s star image in Hollywood film production, as her promotional appearances in fan magazines worked to discipline audience readings of film as artistic. This disciplining, importantly, occurred within a context of larger calls for cinema’s social reform by middle-class white female activists of the period amidst the tempest of ethnic conflict that characterized early anxieties about film’s impact on urban life in the U.S. Viewed through this lens, this chapter grounds one of the significant features of the diva commodity as part of a broader disciplining of consumption that, when extrapolated, not only illustrates what Susan A. Glenn has identified as the roots of modern feminism within the stage cultures of the 19th-century but, more than this, reflects how early notions of feminine empowerment and progress – situated around Victorian discourses of gender and domesticity – would become significant dimensions in the rise of celebrity culture as part of the broader commodity relations between audience-going publics and systems of media production.

Situating Approaches in Diva Studies:

In this chapter, my focus develops academic accounts of this figure through an examination of how the diva has been represented historically in forms of advertising literature, branding, and media representation in early media industry. Attending to these textual forms of promotion and branding, this work attempts to understand how this figure’s relationship to ideologies of the self, sexuality, gender, race, and nationality are advanced self-reflexively through the disciplining of a diva’s star image as imbricated in the ideologies of identification and consumption that mark her

¹¹⁹ Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3.

audience. In working to center these types of texts within an examination of the diva, I consider how the diva's voice is more expansive than sound and conditioned in alternative ways that help an audience cognize the diva as a figure of self-expression through the networks of signification posed by the reading practices of consumer culture, a dynamic particularly illustrative for understanding the commodity relations of early entertainment. Such an emphasis reflects the ways in which the diva's voice and body are themselves produced across an array of other media that work to furnish discourses *representing* her potency and effect on audiences. On this point, the celebration of the diva's performance cannot be limited to the timbre or "body" of her voice but broadens to include a range of other mechanisms for performers to become *of note*. Through performance—defined here as an act of staging or (self-)presenting and expanded to encompass not only vocal but the performance of self through branding and promotional media as advertising—divas assert themselves as celebrated performers, meaning that they participate in and challenge the ways in which the female body—as a cultural representation—reflects the voices and values of its society. Moreover, this focus also works to see the diva as both a counterhegemonic figure for the troubling of identity categories but *also* as a hegemonic figure of industry whose star image and publicity are essential to giving corporeal shape and interest to the forms of media production and consumption that mark a given historical period. In foregrounding this attention, I follow Leo Braudy's observation that the history of fame and celebrity is also the "history of the changing ways by which individuals have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others, and, not incidentally, have thereby gained power over them."¹²⁰

In this chapter, I interrogate how advertising and branding discourse constructed the diva as 'public' through performances of individuality and selfhood through what Alison Hearn calls

¹²⁰ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

“the branded self.”¹²¹ These performances of self, participating in brand construction and management for new media technologies and production companies, invite questions about how performers frame their presentation of self in terms of the brand that they project to their public. For this reason, I examine how these performers are branded through publicity and self-conscious, textual promotion. I do not take up these performers as accidental subjects in the public sphere; but, instead, as subjects whose performances through publicity represent another level of mediation for the purposes of self-promotion, display, and commodification. Thus, the assertion of a diva commodity challenges, informs, and inhabits the construction of social identities as one of the defining aspects of modern cultural consumption. Owing its debts to ideologies of cultural uplift and the operatic arts, the modern diva’s promise of self-representation to those in her audience reflects the broader situation and construction of early media culture’s negotiation of the racial and ethnic tensions of the late-19th-century. Here, this figure appealed to the very self-definitions of bourgeois artistic criticism that animated the re-wiring of national culture by emergent sound recording and motion picture industries of the period. Moreover, these branded notions of self, in both the diva and her spectator-consumer, can, thus, be read as organizing intimate categories of experience when witnessing the diva’s presence and voice. Simon Frith explains this connection between music and identity further by challenging the common assumption that “a social group has beliefs which it then articulates in its music.”¹²² Frith argues that social groups “only get to know themselves *as groups* (as a particular organization of

¹²¹ Hearn writes: “The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce profit. Different inflections of self-branding can be traced across several mediated cultural forms that directly address the constitution and celebration of the ‘self’ as such. The practice of self-branding is clearly expressed and delineated in current management literature as a necessary strategy for success in an increasingly complex corporate world.” See: Alison Hearn, “Variations on the Branded Self: Theme, Invention, Improvisation and Inventory,” in *The Media and Social Theory*, eds. David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 194-210.

¹²² Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 110.

individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgment.”¹²³ Such framing highlights the role that diva celebrity plays in organizing group identities through the various forms of attention their cultural activity as brands organize. In framing these divas as dynamic representations and embodiments of the female body as brand, I analyze how their conscious strategies of self-presentation provide gestures and markers through which they establish reference to the real bodies of their audience and structure the perception of this diva commodity—from phonographs, stage shows, and motion pictures of the early 20th-century—as capable of making audiences *feel* categories of cultural identity as deeply embodied and empowered.

The Virtuosity of the American Diva, Fidelity, and the “Lively” Phonograph:

Writing in 1906, John Philip Sousa decried what he saw as the erasure of human skill in the growth of the phonograph market in the early 1900s. “Sweeping across the country with the speed of a transient fashion in slang or Panama hats, political war cries or popular novels, comes now the mechanical device to sing for us a song or play for us a piano,” Sousa wrote, “in substitute for human skill, intelligence, and soul.”¹²⁴ Sousa’s remarks were rooted in the perceived insincerity of this music, going so far as to cite Wagner’s declaration, “I will not write even one measure of music that is not thoroughly sincere.”¹²⁵ Rooted, perhaps, in religious conceptions of work and labor, his warning typified the kind of moral panic that would be observed throughout much of the 20th-century, where new forms of electronic culture would fundamentally re-shape the sensations

¹²³ Frith, “Music and Identity,” 111.

¹²⁴ John Philip Sousa, “The Menace of Mechanical Music,” *Appleton's Magazine*, Vol. 8 (1906), 278.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

of American life pairing understandings of technological progress with fears of moral loss and decline:

The child becomes indifferent to practice, for when music can be heard in the homes without the labor of study and close application, and without the slow process of acquiring a technic, it will be simply a question of time when the amateur disappears entirely, and with him a host of vocal and instrumental teachers, who will be without field or calling. ... Then what of the national throat? Will it not weaken? What of the national chest? Will it not shrink?¹²⁶

These remarks characterize the social problems of early recorded sound technology, reflective of cultural fears about the ways in which the machine would render human relations for the poorer in society. Patrick Warfield has suggested that this editorial reflected an aspect of Sousa's larger battle for composers' rights; and here, the concern of replaced human musical skills, perhaps, reflects some indication of this reality.¹²⁷ For my purposes, I am interested in how Sousa's arguments reflected social crises of the phonograph to an American public that advertising for these new sound machines sought to resolve.¹²⁸ Within Sousa's writing, this concern illustrates the specifically gendered connotations of these fears as they became elaborated with particularly maternal resonances:

¹²⁶ Sousa, "The Menace of Mechanical Music," 280-81.

¹²⁷ See: Patrick Warfield, "John Philip Sousa and "The Menace of Mechanical Music," *Journal of the Society for American Society*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2009): 431-463.

¹²⁸ To this point, Paul H. Cromelin would respond by placing Sousa's article in a long lineage of cultural fears of technology and automation: "There are those still living who can recall the outcry against the sewing machine, and the predictions that it would deprive the poor sewing girl of her scanty wage. But notwithstanding these predictions, plausible as they appeared to be, there are to-day a score of sewing women earning, and with comparative facility, good wages by the aid of the mechanical device, where there was then one securing a pittance by plying her needle." See: Paul H. Cromelin, "Some of the Replies Evoked by Mr. Sousa's Article," *Appleton's Magazine*, Vol. 8 (1906): 639.

When a mother can turn on the phonograph with the same ease that she applies to the electric light, will she croon her baby to slumber with sweet lullabys, or will the infant be put to sleep by machinery? Children are naturally imitative, and if, in their infancy, they hear only phonographs, will they not sing, if they sing at all, in imitation and finally become simply human phonographs – without soul or expression? Congregational singing will suffer also, which, though crude at times, at least improves the respiration of many a weary sinner and softens the voices of those who live amid tumult and noise.¹²⁹

Featured in Sousa's remarks, here, is the period's intensification of maternal discourses that would characterize the definitional problems of women in public life of the period, as debates about women's suffrage challenged traditional notions of true womanhood. Yet, crucially, Sousa's arguments in "The Menace of Mechanical Music" would serve as a touchstone of cultural phobias across the 20th-century about the effects of technology and mediation, such as they would be defined by emergent social science disciplines, on children. Typified in Sousa's remarks are the aspects of anti-urbanism, fears of civilizational decline phrased through ideologies of motherhood, and distinctly religious resonances that would characterize much of the social conflict of industrialization in the late-19th century as new technologies, immigrant populations, and shifting conceptions of gender-relations re-shaped national fault lines and culture.

Phonograph advertising of the period would come to directly answer Sousa's questions and those like him. Early uses of these sound machines in the 19th-century exhibited similar geographies of the kinoscope, as coin-operated phonographs became found in areas of public amusements. As Karl Hagstrom Miller notes, these locations reflected their status as novelties with

¹²⁹ John Philip Sousa, "The Menace of Mechanical Music," 281.

companies producing sound for the machines that would characterize the re-definition of popular music in the styles of Tin Pan Alley, Broadway hits, light classical selections, and the racial or ethnic caricatures furnished by vaudeville.¹³⁰ The ethnic situation of this music, both in its genre sound and its urbanity, would draw out Sousa's suspicion of slang and Panama hats, as constitutive of a kind of perversion of true music reflected by its commercial aims. Miller also notes that suspicion over this commercialism would extend to record dealers of the period, who worried whether a market for the machine would exist when its novelty had faded.¹³¹ The answers, posed by the Victor Talking Machine Company and the Edison Phonograph Company, would look to ideologies of serious music, gathered by late-19th century opera, to position the new machine and its market as part of a broader strategy of cultural uplift. Within this landscape, Victor Records had turned to the creation of its Red Seal label by signing contracts with Enrico Caruso and other opera singers backed by the new cultural authority of the Metropolitan Opera House as a symbol of American industrial wealth and its accompanying claims on inheriting the great works of the Western tradition. Edison would take a similar tact, as he sought to anthropomorphize the phonograph through promotional tone tests and advertising strategies that directly analogized virtuosities of the human voice, such as the diva's, and that of the fidelity of the sound machine as co-equal instruments. Within this context, both record companies, as they began to organize the consumer market, would work to settle these initial questions about the morally corrosive effects of new technologies by disciplining the reception of the machine through older networks of celebrity and cultural authority that, as Lawrence Levine notes, were particular to defining the cultural claims, rooted in conceptions of class and race as they were, of America's elite at the end

¹³⁰ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 159-160.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 160.

of the 19th-century.¹³² Within this context, there was a split within the public of a taste for American vernacular culture, a situation that had produced national pride in the careers of such artists as Clara Louise Kellogg, Annie Louise Cary, Minnie Hauk, and for emulations of older standards of European exceptionalism that would communicate the equal grandness of American civilization on the world stage. Perhaps, this vexed contention with older European standards of upper-class culture could be viewed through the lens of Henry James's romanticization of the aristocratic tradition of the grand tour in works like *Daisy Miller* (1879) or Mark Twain's parodying of such traditions in "The Innocents Abroad" (1869). In such a way, the disciplining of the phonograph machine, particularly by Edison's reliance on the figuration of Anna Case to brand the phonograph machine, reflected a reconciliation of these competing tensions by constructing a national market for early music culture by exploiting classed traditions of art while infusing certain aspects of Americanism within their branding.

Following the invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison, the emergence of a recording industry in the U.S. replaced older models of music consumption that were predicated on the publishing and purchasing of sheet-music. The surge of record sales to approximately 2.8 million in 1899 created the conditions for the arrival of the "big three" distributors of Edison, Victor, and Columbia in the following decade. Typical of businesses that responded to the return of economic prosperity in the late 1890s, the recording industry grew in tandem with the press and catalogue services of the era as they reached out beyond local markets to achieve a nationwide consumer base.¹³³ Their success yielded different commercial addresses to their new audiences. As Andre Millard describes, the marketing of the Edison record company traditionally yielded a

¹³² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 171-177.

¹³³ Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56.

focus on scientific genius, reflecting the popularity and mythology of Edison as America's "great inventor."¹³⁴ So storied was Edison's signature genius that, quite literally, the records sold under his name bore his signature. As some fears of recorded music grew with the arrival of the phonograph, moreover, the Edison company's focus on his technological genius worked to attach an imprimatur of scientific authenticity and exactness in the faithful reproduction of artistic sound. An ad in *Talking Machine World* took up this aspect of Edison's public reputation to sell his company's personally-patented phonograph machine: "THE MASTER MIND OF THE TALKING MACHINE IDEA: The man who invented the Phonograph: who is ever at work on it, and who has brought it to its present marvelous perfection as a delightful musical instrument."¹³⁵ This marketing of recorded sound's quality was echoed in Edison's competitors even without the advantage of offering the public such a 'name' brand. A Columbia advertisement for its graphophone echoed similar language and ideals: "The "Twentieth Century" Graphophone: The Most Marvelous Talking Machine Ever Constructed. Reproduces the Human Voice With All the Volume of the Original ... Patented in All Civilized Countries."¹³⁶ Their last main competitor, Victor Records, would adopt a similar advertising language of quality by emphasizing expert testimony about its product. In one advertisement listing the names of composers, string experts, pianists, and music appreciators, the Victor Talking machine flaunted its award letter from the Grand Prize at The Jury of Awards on Musical Instruments at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, stating: "The Grand Prize was unanimously awarded by this jury of musical experts to the Victor Talking Machine, because of its marked superiority as a musical instrument over all other sound-

¹³⁴ Millard, *America on Record*, 56.

¹³⁵ "The Master Mind of the Talking Machine Idea," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1905): 20.

¹³⁶ "Arrived: The "Twentieth Century" Graphophone," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (1905): 6.

reproducing machines shown.”¹³⁷ This use of musical expertise drew upon older models and ideas of Victorian taste and hierarchies of art to help distinguish the phonograph as a domestic consumer technology against the available cheap amusements of penny arcades. Crucially, this use of expert testimony reflected chief cultural solutions to some of the resistances to mechanized sound embodied by Sousa’s editorial.

The relationship between the diva commodity and the cultivation of a phonographic audience can be observed in articles appearing in *Talking Machine World* throughout the middle of the 1910s. In February 1915, Edison signed an exclusive contract with The Metropolitan Opera Company’s Anna Case, a soprano.¹³⁸ Case had been known for roles as Feodor in *Boris Godunov* and Micaela in *Carmen*, making her last appearance at the Met in 1920. Echoing the initial inscription of Bernhardt’s celebrity, Case’s physical and vocal presence featured prominently as an accompaniment to the technological display of the Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph’s capacity for sound fidelity. Targeted towards music dealers, one two-page advertisement featured Case performing a tone test in Des Moines, IA. Having offered audiences a pleasing, unparalleled experience of a faithful recording of music to her voice, Edison’s machine – already featuring contracts with other divas like Emmy Destinn – promised to provide dealers “prestige with a musical clientele,” “the approval of a critical musical public,” and the opportunity to “sustain and even advance the perfection of the art of musical reproduction.”¹³⁹ As Emily Thompson has noted, the strategy of these tone tests was managed by the Edison Company’s Engineering Test Service, established in 1917, specifying in contracts that local dealers were to host these events in venues “in which it is customary to give high-class musical entertainments and in which high-class artists

¹³⁷ “Read This Letter from the Judges of Musical Instruments at the St. Louis Exposition,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1905): 6.

¹³⁸ “Miss Case Signs with Edison Co.,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1915): 38.

¹³⁹ “Edison Perfection Demonstrated,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1915): 12-13.

are accustomed to appear.”¹⁴⁰ It is through this classing of performance that Case’s appearances within Edison’s advertisements frequently stressed aspects of technological perfection and faithful recordings of the human voice. More than this, however, the operatic diva signaled the heights of such technological perfection, operating as a hierarchical figure within the emergence of new technological audience formations. In an August issue of *Talking Machine World*, Anna Case’s name, yet again, appeared alongside Albert Spalding, “a renowned American violinist,” to discuss how the Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph was capable of passing the “acid test,” what the ad describes as “when an artificial tone can bear favorable comparison with the original, heard side by side, it can truly be said that perfection has been attained.”¹⁴¹ Representative of Thompson’s observation that such tone tests worked to equate phonographic recordings with live music, one can trace the continued discourse of authenticity within music performance back to these very sound tests – particularly as Jonathan Sterne has underscored the technological debates about whether the machine could recreate “the element of personality.”¹⁴²¹⁴³ These sound tests, moreover, attempted to show audiences that such mechanized experiments were capable of producing “Real music at last.”¹⁴⁴ Embodying constructions of class in ideologies of music consumption, this realness was directly positioned in terms of the originality, purity, richness, and the human quality of the technically trained operatic voice.

To this point, the diva, as a gendered performer within music, stage, and later screen cultures, was treated as an embodiment of the heights of not just human achievement but through

¹⁴⁰ Tone Test Local Contract for Prescott, Arizona, 8 Dec. 1921. Phonograph Division Records (hereafter referred to as PDR), Edison Archives. Quoted in Emily Thompson, “Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America, 1877-1925,” *The Music Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring 1995): 149.

¹⁴¹ “What is the “Acid Test” for a Phonograph?” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 11, No.8 (1915): 8-9.

¹⁴² Emily Thompson, “Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity,” 132.

¹⁴³ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 261-262.

¹⁴⁴ “What is the “Acid Test” for a Phonograph?” *Talking Machine World*.

recorded sound became re-mediated as an example of technological perfection, too. As Edison records were featured in an exposition in San Francisco in October 1915, Case offered her musical presence and the remixing of live performance and mediated sound in what can be observed as a paradigmatic example of the publicity efforts of these tone tests. There, Case was featured in *Talking Machine World* visiting the Geary Street Edison Shop and singing along to some of her records in the store. In this way, these advertisements represent significant publicity strategies employed by Edison in his rollout of the new talking machines. To this point, such acts of publicity can be observed as exploiting the virtuosity of the operatic white female voice – always mentioned through Case’s shorthand identity as a soprano at the Metropolitan Opera House – and its embodied sound in the presence of her body *and* in the phonograph’s sound recording.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, these advertisements reflected the general struggle over defining the humanness of technology, grappled through ideologies of gendered sound, racialized in the context of 19th-century performance traditions, through Case’s operatic voice; moreover, this instance points not only to the economic opportunities for stars of the stage in the early transformations of media industries in the early 20th-century but it also represents a significant way in which the branding of new media technologies through discourses of culture represent critical sites in which the diva as a gendered cultural commodity was forged into a consumer good, an origination reflecting the diva commodity as an artistic object abstracted from the body of the diva herself.¹⁴⁶

Crucially, the development of the cultural commodity for the phonograph through celebrity advertisements in *Talking Machine World* represents a significant way in which the technological

¹⁴⁵ “Excellent Trade Outlook in San Francisco,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 11, No. 10 (1915): 4, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Interestingly, while *Talking Machine World* was largely targeted towards music dealers themselves, there are early examples of an emergent form of celebrity interest that has usually been attributed to *Photoplay* magazines of the period. In March 1916, reports on Anna Case’s health were provided in the magazine: “Anna Case, exclusive Edison artist, is sunning down on the beaches of St. Augustine and Palm Beach, Fla., after spending ten days in Bermuda recuperating from an operation for appendicitis.” See: *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1916): 11.

innovations of the late-19th century became situated within the advertising rhetoric of the early 20th-century. Long before Disney would romanticize entrepreneurial capitalism through notions of technological progress in his exhibitions for the 1964-65 NY World's Fair, these themes could be observed in terms of Edison's own branding within the medium of recorded sound as "Thomas A. Edison's greatest contributions toward human progress, his favorite invention."¹⁴⁷ This positioning provides critical focus on the re-mediation of the diva performance figure



in the development of the phonograph market, as well as the Hollywood film industry, through its continued gathering of the

Figure 3: "Anna Case of the Metropolitan Opera " Advertisement

high cultural associations forged by music, but particularly opera, as emblematic of human progress or civilizational achievement. More to this point, the branding of the humanness of the phonograph technology can be observed in the continued use of renderings of performers like Anna Case in drawings that demonstrate physical intimacy with the technology of recorded sound (fig. 3).¹⁴⁸ Positioning the diva, here, in terms of brand culture allows us to interrogate more deeply the ways in which celebrity idolization, audience formations, and identification can be understood historically through the commodification and consumption of culture. These aspects of consumption, indeed, were conditioned historically through ideologies of cultural uplift as foundational to the ways in which new media technologies were socialized to the U.S. public. The branding of the diva commodity gathered gendered associations of moral virtue, the virtuosity of the female voice, (at times) domesticity, and a nationalist vision of the gendered performer,

¹⁴⁷ "Edison Week – October 16th to 21st," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 12, No 10 (1916): 12-13.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

particularly within the case of Hollywood's appropriation of these branding strategies. Within this context, this chapter directly puts into conversation the ways in which Victorian gender and class ideologies came to be inscribed into the intensifying formalization of recording industries of the period.

Here, the larger networks of middle-class ideology and cultural branding come in service of the industrial decisions surrounding music production at the beginning of the 20th-century. Victor Records, the music production company arm of Eldridge Johnson's Victor Talking Machine, extended the discourse of quality and artistic genius latent in the language of machine marketing. After focusing on removing the white noise interference in the playback of the Victor Talking Machine, the record company focused on the creation and branding of their own Red Seal label series which can serve as another early example of the use of a star system for the marketing of recorded music, as the label's first record featured a performance by the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso at Carnegie Hall in 1903. The label followed up the success of Caruso's record by recruiting stars from New York's famous Metropolitan Opera House. In the five years after the label's introduction, contracts and recordings had been made with several English-language divas as Nellie Melba, Emma Eames, and Geraldine Farrar. To help promote their recordings, Victor Records worked to develop its own series of opera books to help distinguish the process of music consumption by providing a greater patina of connoisseurship to the act of consumption. Published between 1912 and 1976, *The Victrola Book of the Opera* offered record consumers information about the plots of different operas as well as their production histories. Edited by a music executive of Victor Records (Samuel Holland Rous), the outgrowth of this project represented the synthesis of the ideologies of consumption that surrounded the marketing language of Victor Records. Moreover, this marketing language worked to extend the disciplining of musical appreciation

around the phonograph. As Karl Miller notes, “records by the great opera and concert artists of Europe sold heartily, and dealers often compared the talking machine to a home library of great literature,” while they also “promoted the use of art music and opera recordings in public schools as a means of introducing young children to the cultural heritage of the Western tradition.”¹⁴⁹ Marketing language in *Talking Machine World* emphasized the pedagogical elements of distinction in this new class of records, using testimony from Mr. W. Harding Bonner, the chairman of the London Academy of Music:

The greatest advantage in the use of the records by teachers lies in the fact that the student is able to listen, over and over again, to some perfectly sung phrase by the greatest exponents of singing in the world. Imagine, if you can, the cost of engaging Mr. Caruso to sing the same passage over for some twenty times!¹⁵⁰

The use of this testimony reflected the development of a marketing discourse in the new recording industry that drew on a language of cultural uplift by adapting previous traditions of art and their class associations to fit this new technology within ideologies of white middle-class domesticity as the phonograph turned towards the home from sound technology’s early location as a public amusement. As Karl Miller argues, these discourses of “cultural uplift” were “not about transforming American consumer tastes but about changing the very meaning of consumption itself. ... Appeals to high art were, in part, attempts to locate cultural meaning outside of the marketplace.”¹⁵¹ One method of attributing this ideological charge was by the introduction of the Victrola sound machine, a portmanteau of “Victor’s Viola.” In marketing materials, as William Howland Kenney describes, “color advertisements typically showed a tuxedoed or white-tied male

¹⁴⁹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 160-161.

¹⁵⁰ “Mme. Homer Enthusiastic,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (1905): 25.

¹⁵¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 162-63.

and his refined and evening-gowned female companion gracefully seated in their Victorian-furnished parlor before their piano and their Victrola.”¹⁵² Represented in terms of Victorian style and ideologies of class, the machine solved not only ideological but key stylistic issues in the actual technology itself, as the machine became encased in mahogany so as to fit more seamlessly within the Victorian domestic setting. One advertisement for the Victrola in *Ladies Home Journal* emphasized this very aspect: “Horn and all moving parts entirely concealed. Music made loud or soft by opening or closing small doors. The cabinet contains albums for 150 records and drawer for accessories. All metal parts heavily gold-plated.”¹⁵³ This feature and the addition of shelving embodied within the physical features of the device grafted the status of literature onto the actual device of phonograph as a developed “music library.”¹⁵⁴ In materials written for *Talking Machine World*, record dealers were encouraged to sell consumers on the idea of building a library of sound recordings, thus highlighting the educational aspects disciplined by marketing materials of the day:

Give your customer ample opportunity to learn the broad scope of the Victor record catalog by playing for him the best selections from the different departments. ... He becomes a careful buyer, but a better buyer. He places an artistic value on his records, and, what is more, prides himself on his selections, which naturally enough keeps his enthusiasm alive. You will find this kind of a buyer will go the financial limit in order to make additions to his collection.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

¹⁵³ “Victor-Victrola,” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1909, 64.

¹⁵⁴ Karl Miller describes: “Shelves for records suggested an entire world of parallels with book shelves: customers now were to be encouraged to think in terms of amassing “a musical library”; each new record would become an addition to “his library of music,” rather than just another chunk of industrial detritus. Customers were taught to think of record purchases as an artistic responsibility.” See: Miller, *Recorded Music*, 51-52.

¹⁵⁵ “To Increase Record Sales,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (1908): 59.

To this point, previous marketing advice from the company also stressed the cultural aspirations and civilizational attitudes of consumption: “Be a missionary as well as a salesman.”¹⁵⁶

Not only through its use of class signifiers in its turn towards consumer advertising, the pursuit of opera music in the early 1900s and into the 1910s reflected older ideologies from the Victorian-era about the status of opera in American society, constructing a network of ideologies used first by the emergent phonograph industry and made available for the development of the feature film through processes of adaptation and casting. In the late 19th-century, opera itself became a contested category through the lens of class and nationality, reflecting the economic difficulties of the post-Civil War U.S. In her study of the reception of opera in the 19th-century U.S., Katherine S. Preston argues that the period of the 1870s was a crucible for the distinctions that would mark opera in the 20th-century. In the antebellum period of the U.S., opera’s audiences were socially and economically heterogeneous, though there were different functions and uses of opera for various classes.¹⁵⁷ During the panic of 1873, a depression in Europe and North America, over issues of inflation among other causes, caused changes to the cultural perception of opera in the U.S. Marking this shift was a critical discourse that identified opera as authentic through its foreignness, drawing out upper-class fascination with the civilizations of Europe and their association with high culture. Preston explains “undergirding this fixation on imported European styles was a persistent American sense of cultural inferiority and the belief that American musical progress was predicated on mastery and imitation of European music.”¹⁵⁸ Specifically, middle-

¹⁵⁶“Dealers Must Recognize Duty,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (1908): 3.

¹⁵⁷ Katherine K. Preston, “Opera is Elite/Opera is Nationalist: Cosmopolitan Views of Opera Reception in the United States, 1870-90,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2013): 536.

¹⁵⁸ Katherine K. Preston, *Opera for the People: English Language Opera and Women Managers in Late 19th-Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 562.

class suspicions of the opera were frequently expressed in gendered terms by fixating on the extravagance of the diva as she was represented in the press:

Looking around our country, marked in its present travail by silent manufactories, shipwrecked fortunes, lounging laborers deprived of work, and workmen glad to bustle for half-pay, it is not too much to denounce as a *scandal* the conspiracy by a band of singers to charge the public at the rate of four dollars a head, for the privilege of hearing them warble a few notes; and, by way of imposing this unconscionable tariff, to demand for themselves, many of them, the monstrous rate of \$600 a night, or \$3,000 a week. This is the rate demanded by Miss Nilsson, by Lucca, by Irma de Murska, and others of the tuneful pets, who are shipped over here periodically to pull away our money. And not only that, but to sing when they please, to be apologized for when they please, and to have operas changed upon too tolerant audiences when they please;--all, to the fear and terror and frequent bankruptcy of the poor managers, who are at the constant mercy of their caprices and their terms.¹⁵⁹

In addition to the issue of female entitlement, this editorial from a gentleman's newspaper also illustrates the shifting assumptions about foreign-language opera as too expensive, a perception that started to render such opera audiences as more homogenous and exclusive in terms of class.¹⁶⁰ Set against this frustration and the lack of institutional opportunities for American singers in Europe, a growing body of vernacular opera in English grew in popularity among the middle-class between the 1870s and 1880s. This interest in English-language opera, Preston notes, began to disappear throughout the 1890s as audiences turned to other forms of vernacular musical theatre,

¹⁵⁹ "Operatic Despotism," *Spirit of the Times*, November 15, 1872, p.324. Quoted in Preston, *Opera for the People*, 162-163.

¹⁶⁰ Preston, *Opera for the People*, 157.

while at the same time American operatic divas came to be viewed more favorably in both Europe and at the Metropolitan Opera.¹⁶¹ This period, particularly well-examined through Preston's work, illustrates the ways in which vernacular theater worked, in some part, to assuage cultural suspicions of foreignness during a period that saw its own rise in xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment that would come to the fore through exclusionary legislation as The Immigration Act of 1882. Within this lens, it is important to note that opera's class connotations were preserved in an American upper-class society seeking to emulate the British aristocracy during the rise of the Gilded Age in the U.S. This hybridity can be observed in the echoes of Geraldine Farrar's star image as part of the larger constellations of branding and marketing that were used in the pioneering of a middle-class market for feature films and phonograph records. This defining management of ethnic and racial tensions by turning towards vernacular theater helps explain, in part, the use of the diva commodity within the context of Hollywood's middle-classing of cinema through literary and operatic adaptations in the 1910s.

The Diva's Rhetoric of Nationality and Class – From Italian to American Cinema:

As the operatic diva became a figure of not just cultural but economic import in international theatrical circuits, she came to exist, by the end of the 19th-century, as an avatar for not only European nationality, as in the case of Jenny Lind's "Swedish Nightingale," but also the supremacy of Italian culture, via Adelina Patti, as two markers of Western civilizational achievement. This ideology can be observed in a study of early Italian film in which the diva, moving from the stage, became an early example of media convergence between the theatrical and film industries. From its very beginning, cinema has shown an interest in the use of opera for film,

¹⁶¹ Preston, *Opera for the People*, 563.

reflecting, in part, the interest of the medium's proponents to draw upon middle-class traditions of literature and culture to build a mass media audience. Increased interest in opera in cinema globally during this period reflected, partly, the rise of the *film d'art* movement in France and the emergence of increased copyright legislation that privileged middle-class materials as literature and the operatic stage for adaptation to the silver screen in the U.S.¹⁶²

Studies of the Italian diva frequently draw attention to the figure's relationship to gender, thinking of this connection in terms of the diva's feminist potential in marking out women's access to the public stage, literary views of feminine power and character, or women's economic participation within the nascent marketplace of the early modern era. Specifically, Rosalind Kerr's work has traced the emergence of the diva as a model of the professional working actress to the conditions of the 16th-century *commedia dell'Arte* by examining how female performers achieved status as types of celebrity headliners for an emerging class of professional theaters.¹⁶³ In situating this Italian diva as a harbinger of a global celebrity culture, Kerr provocatively argues "in tracing the historical progression of the actress's materialization...this work explores the ways in which actresses used their appeal as sexual, cultural, and commodity fetishes to target their audiences' desires," thus gesturing to how the emergence of this gendered entertainer provided for new forms of women's subjectivity when considering how their bodies elicited religious objections through ideologies of anti-theatricalism.¹⁶⁴ Kerr's work recovers an analysis of the marketing materials, such as they were, that provided female performers their own celebrity and iconicity that historicizes a central connection between the diva's talent and adherence to the self-promotional

¹⁶² Mervyn Cooke, "Opera and Film," *Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2011), 266.

¹⁶³ Rosalind Kerr, *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage* (Toronto, CN: University of Toronto, 2015), 3.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

aims of celebrity culture through publicity. Thinking of a commodified image and performance of womanhood as its own type of commodity fetish, Kerr writes: “The emergence of celebrity culture at this time is closely connected to the rise of market capitalism and its need to sell products by catering to public demand.”¹⁶⁵ Within acknowledging this context, Kerr observes how female divas turned to their gender as part of their constructed commercial address, while embodying certain elements of cultural modernism by breaking taboos about women’s presence in public spaces.

Drawing on the *commedia dell’arte* stage, forms of opera, as *opera buffa* (i.e. a comic opera), theatrically revealed gender as an ideological system through combative plots about the relationships between men and women. Within the genre, Heather Hadlock has identified two female stock characters that present exaggerated tropes of womanhood, such as the sassy girl and the docile woman.¹⁶⁶ These archetypes exaggerate “femininity in order to affirm its power,” contrasting with the treatment of men in such narratives: “The primary male type, therefore, is an officially powerful master whose exaggerated faith in his own authority, intelligence and charisma contributes to his downfall by the combined efforts of the subordinate characters.”¹⁶⁷ As these literary tropes identify part of the inner workings of the sexual politics of the historical diva on the Italian stage, these female performers often marked new accommodations for women in the public sphere. As Naomi Adele André has observed in later time periods, “The changing aesthetics at the beginning of the nineteenth century presented a conflict. Though the *sound* of the castrato voice was desired, the *sight* of the castrato on the opera stage had fallen out of vogue.”¹⁶⁸ As André

¹⁶⁵ Kerr, *The Rise of the Diva*, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Heather Hadlock, “Opera and Gender Studies,” in *Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 257-275.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁶⁸ Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 89.

catalogues, the casting of heroic roles had treated castrati and women as interchangeable throughout much of the eighteenth century. Intriguingly, the popularity of women's voices on the stage reflected a certain kind of nostalgia for the former. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, this situation had changed as women became "the sound par excellence" for lead character roles.¹⁶⁹ In recognizing this history of Italian opera, the figure of the diva invites critical questions about the emergence of women in public life through the stage and the negotiation of gender and gender ideologies that make up this type of performance of female publicness. Speaking to these questions, Hilary Poriss and Rachel Cowgill have specifically turned to the representational discourse of philanthropic outreach that followed the life-writing about the diva and her relationship to selfless acts of devotion to the public. For her part, Poriss has situated how these narratives softened the imagination around specific performers while also functioning to negotiate gendered stereotypes about female ambition and success. Poriss writes: "narratives of generosity helped to ameliorate images of avariciousness, humanizing the prima donna and situating her among the ranks of many other middle- and upper-class women who devoted their spare time toward helping those in need."¹⁷⁰

As Angela Dallas Vache has studied, the diva, in early Italian cinema, specifically designated "a female star in a feature film that ran at least sixty minutes and included some close-ups for the heroine and a fairly static use of the camera," drawing upon the historical lineage of this figure within Italian opera.¹⁷¹ Vache's work traces the ways in which the Italian film industry turned to history, religion, literature, and opera as the archive for this national cultural memory. In

¹⁶⁹ Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds.), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxxvii.

¹⁷¹ Angela Dallas Vache, *Divas: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2008), 1.

recognizing this context, Vache observes two central genres of films that emerged out of Italian ambitions for the international film marketplace. The first has been better well-studied by academics due to its impact on the developments of the American feature film namely that of the historical film *a la* Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* (1913), Mario Caserini and Eleuterio Rodolfi's *Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii* (1914; *The Last Days of Pompeii*) and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), all strong examples of historical epics that influenced the emerging middle class address of 1910s U.S. cinema.¹⁷² Moreover, Vache's work recovers the significance of a second genre, the diva film, as one nearly equal to that of the historical film genre in contrast to academic work that has sought to marginalize the diva film within traditions of melodrama.¹⁷³ Casting such divas as Lyda Borelli, Pina Menichelli, and Francesca Bertini, the diva film centered female narratives of victimhood by foregrounding their moral corruption by young men through acts of cheating, stealing, lying, and adultery. More than this, the diva, as figured in Italian cinema, Vache contends, was uniquely concerned with issues of history set within more personal and gendered terms. She argues:

This icon became a model of transition for Italian women and a figure of temporality for the society at large. So intensely preoccupied was she with the theme of transformation that her sinuous, ever-shifting outline stood for the ways in which Italian men and women experienced change and looked at modernization with both eagerness and fear. The diva's

¹⁷² Vache, *Diva*, 2.

¹⁷³ Vache's argument here revises the work of Gian Piero Brunetta who "has argued that the historical genre was more important both aesthetically and commercially than melodrama" with the recognition that "the diva film was at least competitive with, and perhaps equal to, the historical film in popularity." Secondly, Vache identifies the diva film as a genre in its own right: "the diva film was... not an occasional specialization of melodrama in gender. Diva films became a genre because of the intense social consciousness they exhibited in denouncing the corruption of adult young males." See: Vache, *Diva*, 2;

corporeal plasticity was nothing else than a symptom of ambiguity and uncertainty about breaking away from the past and moving into the future.¹⁷⁴

As dramatized in film acting, these intimate terms were externalized through overreactive and spectacular modes of performance in contrast to novelistic and psychological traditions of characterization.¹⁷⁵ The diva film posed itself as an Italian national product that represented the overall development, as in other places, of cinema's search for legitimacy as an aesthetic medium in its own right, often by insinuating itself into questions of national identity and gender/sexual politics through strategies of branding.

Moreover, the diva film, along with the historical epic, became influential for new forms of film production in the United States. Just as Sarah Bernhardt and her towering stature had been contracted to star in Adolph Zukor's import of *Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth* (1912), American divas and famous stage actresses were offered similar opportunities in roles that seemed to both explicitly and implicitly draw upon the stakes and emotional life of womanhood. Of these examples of American divas who were contracted from the stage to the screen, one prominent example is Geraldine Farrar who was engaged by the Lasky Feature Play Company and became something of a muse for Cecil B. DeMille's early film work. During her working relationship with DeMille, Farrar starred in no less than six feature films with the director, including *Carmen* (1915), *Temptation* (1915), *Maria Rosa* (1916), *Joan the Woman* (1916), *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), and *The Devil-Stone* (1917). These films frequently took up the gendered terms of sentimentality that mark women's culture. In one of two Hollywood adaptations of *Carmen* that year, Farrar plays the title role in this opera adaptation in which the seductive Carmen corrupts an officer of the

¹⁷⁴ Vache, *Diva*, 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

military into turning on his country. In *Temptation*, Farrar plays the opera singer Renee Dupree who must deal with her possible sexual exploitation by the theater's boss Otto Mueller when attempting to seek more money from him to care for her ailing husband. The dimensions of Farrar's status as an opera diva informs her narrative on-screen presence, not only in the adaptation *Carmen* but also in *Temptation* and *The World and Its Woman* (1919), a Frank Lloyd film in which Farrar plays Marcia Warren, a Russian peasant, who rises to fame as a diva of opera within the context of the Russian revolution. Not all her roles would explicitly draw upon Farrar's brand as an opera diva. In *Maria Rosa*, Farrar plays a Catalonian peasant who is tricked by Ramon into marrying him after he sets her admirer up to go to prison for a crime that he had, in fact, committed. Across many of these narratives, the screen-image of the diva came to draw out questions of sexual courtship, marriage, and the depravity of men as central themes. Crucially, Farrar's stardom illustrates the proximities of the emergence of cinema as a serious, artistic medium and the prestigious capacity of opera as a branding technique in the early promotional culture of Hollywood production.

One understandable question to ask is why did the emerging Paramount Pictures studio choose Geraldine Farrar, an Irish-American opera actress who the leading fan magazine *Photoplay* re-assured audiences was "an American girl of American parentage"?¹⁷⁶ Part of the answer to this question has much to do with the growth of cultural commodities in the early 20th-century and the central tensions and debates that made opera an attractive genre for the marketing of new media technologies and entertainments. Specifically, the Lasky Feature Play Company, soon to be merged with Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Film Company, represented an industrial effort to market cinema as an art for middle and upper-class consumption largely achieved by producing

¹⁷⁶ "Pictures of Popular Photoplayers," *Photoplay*, February 1916, 14.

film adaptations of stage and literary works, thus situating the ‘popular’ medium of film within older traditions of culture viewed as more legitimate.¹⁷⁷ These tensions suffuse the press and publicity materials for the release of Farrar’s performance in *Carmen* (1915) that succeeded in its competition against the additional adaptation of the opera starring Theda Bara and directed by Raoul Walsh of the same year, pointing to the ways in which the operatic diva was made available as a model of stardom in the development and commercialization of the feature film through stage adaptations. Moreover, Farrar’s emergence into film-acting was viewed as positioning cinema in higher cultural traditions that granted it cultural legitimacy as an art. Writing in *Moving Picture World*, W. Stephen Bush arrived at this point by noting “so great is the distance between the operatic stage and the life on the screen—so different are the activities and the atmospheres of these two forms of entertainment—that the questions: Who is Geraldine Farrar? What has she done? are in these columns not as unpardonable as they must seem to the army of Miss Farrar’s admirers and devotees.”¹⁷⁸

To recall, Victor Talking Machine Company facilitated a strong usage of an emergent recording industry star system through its exclusive contract with Victor Caruso, which would eventually lead to the establishment of their Red Seal Label.¹⁷⁹ Curiously, within many accounts of Victor Records, little attention is paid to Geraldine Farrar, who would illustrate many of the trajectories that the music industry would take as it co-mingled with other cultural industries from the 1910s into the 1930s, a period that demonstrates strong convergences between the development of radio and sound film before television would provide new opportunities in the late 1940s and 1950s for a broad organization of cultural industries. Discussing why exclusionary discourses in

¹⁷⁷ Sumiko Higashi, “Cecil B. DeMille and the Lasky Company: Legitimizing Feature Film as Art,” *Film History*, Vol. 4 (1990): 181-197.

¹⁷⁸ W. Stephen Bush, “Geraldine Farrar for the Screen,” *Moving Picture World*, May 8, 1915, 879.

¹⁷⁹ Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity*, 13.

opera were resistant to vernacular English-language recordings, Richard Leppert also details the class politics of this commercial industry in its deliberate focus on ideologies of connoisseurship that framed music listening as an art of cultivation in the branding rhetoric of these records.¹⁸⁰ These discourses, however, also reflected the desire to position operatic sound as universal, as Timothy Taylor observes that champions of highbrow tastes like opera saw in recorded music the promise of the “democratization of access to great music, ...Americans of all walks of life, even in remote areas, would be able to hear great music for the first time.”¹⁸¹ Intriguingly, this discourse of artistic democratization in music criticism and branding often paralleled industrial attempts at gaining exclusivity over its artist roster, as Victor Records worked to ban its stars from appearing on radio in the 1920s.¹⁸² While exclusivity had been attempted in radio, it is, perhaps, curious that this same policing had not guarded against opera stars like Farrar appearing in the motion pictures, likely because of the musical limitations of *silent* cinema such that Victor Records could maintain exclusivity over the *sound* of opera recordings.

Embodying the developing discourse of stardom and celebrity within the emergent phonograph industry, Geraldine Farrar embodied the class interests of the medium. Her appearances at the Metropolitan Opera House became coded into publications like *Talking Machine World* as representations of “high class goods” in the form of opera records whose sales had been amplified by the grand opera season.¹⁸³ As phonograph companies worked to calibrate the fidelity of their sound reproductions, such stars were used forcefully in the trade press to assert the quality of such recording technologies and early recording studios. In fact, early trade stories include reference to the development of future wares and recordings by reporting on recent studio

¹⁸⁰ Leppert, *Aesthetic Technologies of Modernity*, 103.

¹⁸¹ Timothy Taylor, *Music in the World: Selected Essays* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2017), 75.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁸³ “Good Reports from Cincinnati,” *The Talking Machine World*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (1907): 35.



visits by Caruso and Farrar who “expressed themselves as wonderfully well pleased with the arrangements and results obtained” in the new Victor facilities.¹⁸⁴ Farrar, herself, was represented as a valuable asset for the studio, signing an exclusive agreement with the company in 1908 after making records in European countries. The decision, while not stated directly, seemed implied by the press that it resulted after Farrar being “greatly impressed at the magnificent equipment of the Victor plant, and at the care and attention which marked every part of the process of record taking.”¹⁸⁵

Figure 4: “Miss Farrar Listening to “I’m Afraid to Come Home to Come Home in the Dark,”” By Clarice Vance.

Representative of the ways technology became embodied through operatic celebrity, Farrar can be

seen next to the article standing next to one of Victor’s talking machines (fig. 4).¹⁸⁶

Possible reasons explaining the use of this operatic sound reflected, perhaps, the ways in which these sound technologies worked to insinuate themselves into the social relations of U.S. culture of the period. For instance, one article entitled “Proven Value of Recitals to the Dealer” in *Talking Machine World* describes, just as the press would later claim about Edison’s Tone Tests, how music recitals with these sound machines were important for the sale of records. However, the article cautions dealers to displace the aspects of commercialism associated with these recitals, quoting a music industry figure:

¹⁸⁴ "Trade Happenings in Philadelphia," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1908): 37.

¹⁸⁵ ""Snap Shots" at Victor Factory," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1908): 52.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

My idea of the recital feature is to eliminate commercialism. Don't advertise that 'Smith & Brown Co.' invite you to a recital; rather say the management of 'Grand Opera Hall,' 'Victor Hall,' 'Edison hall,' or any other suggestive name, will present Caruso, Melba, Farrar, Sousa's Band, etc. Do not add that the 'Victrola' will do the work You arouse curiosity by not doing so.¹⁸⁷

In such reviews, the classing of these cultural technologies reflected how the emergent phonograph industry hoped to displace aspects of commercialism by drawing on ideologies of serious music. This technological progress, moreover, became situated in the rhetoric of cultural progress through the value of these celebrity artists. Moreover, these discourses of serious music, emptied of commercialism, also illustrated attempts to de-urbanize the listening contexts of music. Even as the Metropolitan Opera House reflected the primacy of New York as the setting for elite culture, articles also seemed cognizant of the racial (and racist) associations of crime and dirtiness that had characterized urban imaginings of immigration that had preceded the foundation of these cultural industries. Oddly, consumerism, associated with urban geography through Baudelaire's literary work, reflects this tension, moreover, where the consumption of mass goods to produce social distinction occurs, often, as a rejection of identification where mass assemblages of people gather. Against this context, one trade article drew on ideologies of domesticity against the image of the soiled, boozy city to make claims about preferring to see mechanized sound than cheap city performers, stating:

There is no better way of rapidly advancing civilization than by making the home more attractive than the street, thus eliminating the desire to wander abroad in the nocturnal

¹⁸⁷ "Proven Value of Recitals to the Dealer," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 8, No.3 (1912): 3.

hours, and, also destroying the germ of immorality with which the night air is saturated. The fellow would be a poor fool who would prefer a dollar a night cabaret singer to Geraldine Farrar, or a squawky dance hall orchestra to Sousa or Liberati.¹⁸⁸

Indicative of the Victrola's martialing of gender and domesticity in its advertising, such trade articles represent the ways in which sound technologies became embodiments of anti-urban sentiments particularly with their ennoblement of the white domestic setting against the encroaching racialization of the city phrased in terms of culture and hygiene.

Embodying these discourses in some senses, Geraldine Farrar seemed attractive to the nascent feature film industry for what she offered in terms of the patina of class, while embodying cinema's hopes to be considered a legitimate art. When André Bazin would claim in writing the history of cinema that "every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins," he had meant that the rhetoric of cinema as a technology had long outpaced its technological capacity, obviously reflected in the range of challenges, particularly around sound, that had marked the emergence of the classical Hollywood film as a commodity until at least the 1930s.¹⁸⁹ Bazin's notion of a myth of total cinema rejects the claim that its invention reflected purely scientific innovation, particularly when understanding how much of Edison's bluffs, patents, and publicity helped to secure and furnish cinema its audience. The construction of such a myth, perhaps, needs to be better situated in terms of the societal and cultural undercurrents that marked cinema's invention, precisely, as an art. To this point, Geraldine Farrar's placement in the cinema reflected this very optimism about the promise of cinema as a grand art on the scale of opera. Of course, to be clear, I confirm no claims about certain hierarchies of art

¹⁸⁸ "A Christmas Sermon from Santa Claus," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 10, No. 12 (1914): 50.

¹⁸⁹ André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," *What is Cinema (Vol. 2)*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

only that the existence of such hierarchies illustrates how the search for artistic authenticity in the cinema often concealed the commercialism of the medium. It was this commercialism, in fact, that had led the Supreme Court to conclude that film was censorable, arguing:

The exhibition of moving pictures is a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit like other spectacles and not to be regarded as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion within the meaning of freedom of speech and publication guaranteed.¹⁹⁰

In some senses, responding to both this decision and earlier developments of state censorship boards reflected the need to appropriate high art's discourses of quality and expressiveness as what Jane Bennett has elsewhere referred to as "commodity enchantment."¹⁹¹ Cinema's development within this period to a middle-class audience came to draw on ideologies of mechanical reproduction as offering the accessibility or democratization of culture, a discourse that was echoed in debates about the phonograph. Appropriating the diva's star image and operatic discourses of art embodies cinema's emergence as an object of bourgeois society by situating itself within the terms of art criticism furnished by the middle-class's function as literary and epistemological gatekeepers within emergent urban publishing centers.

Within this context, criticism about Farrar's appearance in the cinema frequently played out these class and commercial interests. Upon announcing Farrar's appearance in *Carmen* (1915), in fact, a publicity event was structured like one of Case's tone tests for the Edison phonograph. Drawing on fantasies of royalty and operatic queens, the preview in *Talking Machine World*

¹⁹⁰ Supreme Court of the United States, *Mutual Film Corp. v. Ohio Indus'l Comm.*, 236 U.S. 230, 1914.

¹⁹¹ Jane Bennett, "Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment," in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 111-128.

entitled “Royal Greeting for Farrar,” recounts that after an enthusiastic announcement of Farrar’s appearance in *Carmen* that an attendant had played a Victrola with Farrar’s recording of “Habanera.” Not reflected in this article is whether or not the announcement served as an alliance between the Victor Talking Machine company and Lasky’s Feature Play Company but the appearance of the Victrola in the press announcement and the tendencies of this emergent star system to be controlled through strong promises of exclusivity, though not in cinema, lends some credence to this suggestion. Adding more support to this proposition, however, Farrar’s press frequently discussed the playing of music on the set of *Carmen*, in some senses, reflecting the emphasis on Farrar as a musical personality and, hopefully, supporting sales of her work. The original announcement concludes, “Miss Farrar has a Victrola in her own apartments and also one at the Lasky studios.”¹⁹² Upon the film’s release, her press would feature promotions of both *Carmen* and Victor Records while demonstrating similar echoes of the fidelity discourse long associated with phonograph advertising:

“They give me an opportunity to act the part of Carmen, as I think it should be acted without having to think of saving my breath and strength for singing the lines," quotes the diva. ... Geraldine ...on the subject of Victor records.. averred that they had been a splendid help and inspiration to her and that she deems them wonderful reproductions of her voice.¹⁹³

Reflecting the need to study cultural industries across mediums, Farrar’s appearances in cinema’s trade presses are also compelling sources to mine the ideological and cultural politics at work in Farrar’s star image. Noted for stage performances in *Marguerite*, *Carmen*, and *Madame*

¹⁹² “Royal Greeting for Farrar,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (1915): 30.

¹⁹³ “New Interview with Farrar,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (1916): 37-38.

Butterfly along with large record sales, Farrar was sold to the movie-going public as a star rooted in discourses of cultural uplift not only for the audience but the medium of cinema itself:

Geraldine Farrar, you will say then, is an operatic star of the first magnitude ... but how will Geraldine Farrar enrich the lore of the screen? I might here break forth into exclamations than which there is nothing cheaper either in rhetoric or in journalism...Miss Farrar loves the screen. At first, its attraction to her came through curiosity; curiosity gave way to study; study resulted in love and devotion. The new art woke an echo in the soul of the artist. How little do we of the plain and common mould know of the passion which Nature stirs in the heart of the artist – the passion to please, to delight, to uplift mankind, to lure it away from the sordid and the commonplace and force it into a glimpse of the divine. Can we doubt that the motion picture is capable of stirring such a passion in a soul of the type of Geraldine Farrar? ... the resolution of this marvelously gifted young woman to employ her talents in the attaining of success in the films is the greatest step in advancing the dignity of the motion picture, in freeing it from the bane of prejudice, in winning for it the good opinion of the public.¹⁹⁴

While the language is prone to hyperbole consistent with forms of marketing, the terms of this promotion and branding are decidedly around themes of cultural uplift in ways that draw out the high cultural valences of opera as ways of re-defining cinema *as* an artistic medium. Moreover, it should be noted the adherence of a discourse of cultural uplift to the notion of cinema through opera is itself not necessarily accidental. Such language came on the heels of the decision by the Supreme Court in *Mutual Film*. For this reason, the seeming response of Hollywood production

¹⁹⁴ W. Stephen Bush, "Geraldine Farrar for the Screen," 879.

studios to draw on new types of celebrity seem firmly imbricated within these tensions and debates. Yet crucially, Farrar's career also represented a triangulation of ethnic tensions that had been posed by the new medium. The phonograph record industry had worked to dislodge recorded sound's associations as an urban public amusement, with its associations of the bricolage of ethnic sounds in urban cities, by presenting the machine within Victorian ideologies of womanhood to show the machine could, indeed, be "domesticated." In contrast, cinema had to solve these urban ethnic crises by managing these anxieties within the physical space of the movie theater in its mixing of social classes and ethnic groups.

Farrar's star image also worked to assuage the gendered anxieties of women in public life that came into focus as a result of film's popularization. This star image, existing for the love of art and outside pecuniary interest, recalls the gendered traits of the Victorian-era's concept of "true womanhood,"—i.e. piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—and situates them within an identification with moviegoing as an experience of culture. This dynamic stands against many of the various tensions that marked cinema during the high period of the progressive era. Between the 1900s and 1910s, cinema, as theatrical space, became the subject of middle-class critique, a traditional story in early cinema historiography, as the conditions of the nickelodeon became subject to the reformist impulses of the period. Nickelodeons were characterized, in part, as poorly regulated spaces in both the social and architectural sense. Architectural due to the nickelodeon's often haphazard conversion from storefronts into theatrical venues loaded with large audiences despite clear risks posed in the event of a fire. Of the activist groups focused on the social effects of cinema, the Women's Christian Temperance Union featured several criticisms about the nickelodeons in their literature. Representative of what Alison M. Parker has referred to as "mothering the movies," WCTU's reform efforts, led largely by middle-class women, used

rhetoric about the moral effects of film on children often comparing cinema's mass culture to the depredatory effects of alcohol on youth.¹⁹⁵ In these ways, the physical site of the exhibition environment, the nickelodeon, was often framed through issues of precarity and imperilment. Moreover, these imperiled subjects, like other types of moral panics in U.S. history, were children and young women—but with specifically immigrant resonances—as new governmental reports of the era frequently reported on the rising audience of children in theaters. At the same time, sexual anxieties concerning independent, wage-earning girls in the 'modern' cosmopolitan city came to imbue these same venues as implicitly sexual spaces.

Within the context of 1910s U.S. cinema, *Photoplay* represented a key platform for disseminating Hollywood's promotional materials to a growing fanbase for its films and stars. Throughout the pages of this magazine, intimate details about the lives and personalities of each star were carefully laid out to the public to attract public fascination. The strategies used to represent these performers to an emerging Hollywood public are critical to understanding the ways in which the phonographic diva's public self-display was a formula replicated by *Photoplay* for achieving a more legitimate notion of cinema in the United States. In the leadup to her debut in *Carmen*, Geraldine Farrar was profiled by Morris Gest, a theatrical producer, who positioned Farrar in terms of her middle-class skepticism about the cinema. On the subject of her movie attendance, Farrar is described as having admitted in confidence that “she had seen but one “picture show” in her life – “Quo Vadis”—only a year ago at the Cinema Theater in Paris.”¹⁹⁶ Emblematic of the film d'art movement, *Quo Vadis* (1913) evokes the same attitude of aesthetic respectability yearned for throughout the 1910s. This yearning consisted of courting a middle-class audience that

¹⁹⁵ Alison M. Parker, “Mothering the Movies,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 73-96.

¹⁹⁶ Morris Gest, “Winning Farrar,” *Photoplay*, July 1915, 115-116.

led to the expansion of the film industry from nickelodeons into the picture palaces by pioneering the development of the multi-reel feature film. Represented in the article as a convert to the movies through her decision to start working earnestly within the moving pictures, Farrar's celebrity and her advocacy of the movies aimed to contribute middle-class respectability onto cinema through its associations with higher art forms like opera. When discussing her trip to the new picture palace, the Strand, built in 1914, Farrar cries: "it is almost as big as the Metropolitan Opera House! I had no idea so many people went to see moving pictures – and such people! I really see opera-goers here."¹⁹⁷ In a certain way, the interview tries to balance between the humble nature of Farrar's celebrity and the economic dimensions of her motion picture career. Lasky, in a business meeting with the diva, emphasizes his economic commitments to her presence in his films: "You can tell her that for every minute of daylight she is in Southern California, whether she is at the studio or not, I will pay her two dollars—and a royalty, and a share of all profits."¹⁹⁸ In ways that play out similar anxieties about women and the marketplace, Gest characterizes Farrar as humble in her economic activity:

Unlike a great many opera stars, Miss Farrar is not mercenary. In all our conversations only the artistic side of her pictures had been discussed. We almost had our first serious quarrel over her attempt to force me to take the profit-and-royalty clause for myself. I at length made her see that my interest was a friendly one, and that I had not invaded her home as a friend to make personal profit.¹⁹⁹

Through such encounters, Farrar's display of feminine virtue – around her non-threatening economic relationships with men in particular – reflected the artistic discourses at work in the

¹⁹⁷ Gest, "Winning Farrar," 116.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

middle-classing of cinema. Crucially, the value of the diva commodity not only works within establishing an audience for a specific object of culture, but this commodity also works as part of the ways in which cinema as a technological medium developed in its relationship to bourgeois society as a medium capable of artistic expression.

Moreover, the use of the diva commodity as an object of bourgeois criticism also worked against fears of ethnic and sexual mixing posed by the space of the movie theater. This fear, moreover, was also accentuated by the types of filmic content filling the theaters in the early part of the 1910s. As Shelley Stamp has chronicled, the 1910s featured a number of films promising to document in fiction the nature of the “white slave trade” that aimed to shock and titillate their audiences, through such titles as *Traffic in Souls* (1913), *The Inside of the White Slave Trade* (1913), *Smashing the Vice Trust* (1914), *House of Bondage* (1914), and *Is Any Girl Safe?* (1916). This “white slave trade” film articulated the hysteria of the early part of the century around sex-work and the moral boundaries involved in prostitution, as urban vice commissions took up the language of slavery to discuss this kind of labor through accounts of women being lured, abducted, or trafficked in public, urban space. Stamp writes:

The link between women’s recreation and vice, upon which white slave narratives turned, positioned cinema at its nexus as both site of potential entrapment and source of information. Even as films became one of the primary means by which sensational tales of the slave traffic were disseminated in the early 1910s, motion picture *theatres* featured prominently in warnings against the vice trade.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Shelley Stamp, “Is Any Girl Safe? Female Spectators at the White Slave Films,” *Screen*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 3.

Stamp's work on the white slave trade film presents a contrary narrative to the image of the picture palace and the encroachment of middle-class respectability on cinema and its institutions throughout the 1910s in response to reformist activism. Attempting to understand this dualism of the period, perhaps, brings us to a certain understanding of competitive branding practices within the early years of the cinematic medium. As these moral fears proliferated about the venue of cinema and its sensationalist content depicting more explicit sexual themes, the figure of the diva represented a competing class and gendered brand of cinema. This tension between the imperiled American girls of the vice films and the portrait of American girl innocence and domesticity signified by Farrar's star image illustrates a topography of the ways in which gender was commodified in the early film industry that often reflected Victorian ideologies of womanhood by promising better classes of entertainment for its audiences.

While such sexual panics might be viewed as exceptional discourses about cinema's risks to urban women, it is important to remember that such discourses shaped, at a certain level, even representations of cinema's consumers. As Diana Anselmo-Sequeira observes, the roots of the screen-struck girl prototype for cinema at the dawn of the 20th-century represented a reconfiguration of older models and identities of fandom as "the stage-struck girl" and "the matinee girl."²⁰¹ Newspapers represented these fans through popular tropes as the at-risk girl who, under the spell of theatre, might make risky decisions to join entertainment and flirt with other men. This genealogy of female fandom does much to illustrate how new technological mediums draw upon older histories of cultural consumption. As Anselmo-Sequeira discovers, critics represented this gendered cinematic figure's "overblown devotion to the medium pathologically" that caused such

²⁰¹ Diana Anselmo-Sequeira, "Screen-Struck: The Invention of the Movie Girl Fan," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2015): 9.

‘girls’ to blur boundaries between reality and fantasy, spectator and screen, fan and star.²⁰²

Accounts of these women, on at least one occasion, found recourse to viral metaphors of contagion:

Only a generation back, the bugaboo in the family was the lure of the stage. . . . The stage-struck girl bloomed each fall . . . in the factory, the shop, the school-room and the drawing room. . . . After all, it amounted only to a disease which every girl had in the course of evolution, like croup or measles. Today we have the movie-struck girl.²⁰³

My attention here pauses on this viral metaphor about film as contagious precisely as it fits into earlier observed language about the ‘hygiene’ of culture being specifically placed in proximity to cinema as an urban amusement, just as the cabaret singer in her comparison to Farrar’s great arts. Recognizing this continued language, perhaps, draws out the explicitly urban, ethnic, and therefore sexual anxieties that played out in concerned discourses about women’s ‘contact’ with the cinema. Moreover, these fears of viral contagion, framed through earlier observed ideologies of cultural hygiene, draw out the resolutely sexual dimensions of this panic, reflecting, in some senses, how cinema’s adaptation of high culture—through Farrar’s entrance into the cinema as moving in concert with the architectural developments of the Picture Palaces—reflected the ways in which such discourses of class managed sexual anxieties about women.

Set against the urban anxieties of the nickelodeon and the effects of film on the minds of young girls, Farrar’s stardom in *Photoplay* articulated an image of womanhood that represented a much less inflammatory version of female visibility in public urban space. An example of the

²⁰² Anselmo-Sequeira, “Screen-Struck, 11.

²⁰³ Quoted from Anselmo-Sequeira. See: Anna Steese Richardson, "'Filmitis,' the Modern Malady- Its Symptoms and Its Cure," *McClure's Magazine*, January 1916, 12-14.

public relations work of early Hollywood cinema, the development of Farrar's personal image worked, in some senses, to assuage middle-class anxieties about the cinema. Specifically, this characterization of her star image worked to expand the medium of cinema and its cultural capital through her status as an opera singer. In an article on the production of *Carmen* (1915), the central motifs of Farrar's star-image are maintained through emphases on her docile nature to take direction under Cecil B. DeMille and her vocal prowess. At the same time, Farrar's own comments would give further shape to the aesthetic cultivation of cinema by speaking to the potency of the close-up in interpreting a character. Farrar is described as exclaiming:

I love the freedom of the pictures. It is as if bonds that strapped down the spirit were broken. ... In grand opera, every gesture, every movement has to be in perfect accord with the score. And even the most wonderful music ever written isn't altogether forgivable for holding the actress prisoners. But here. Ah, here it is different. At first, I asked Mr. de Mille if there were any time limit to playing certain scenes. He said: 'You just act them as long as you please.' So now I emote for fifty, seventy-five or a hundred feet if the spirit moves me. And do you know I believe *Carmen* is being truly interpreted for the first time.²⁰⁴

In this way, Farrar's interview situates her relationship to her gender within the standards of female respectability of her day. More than this, however, she also functions as a guarantor of a certain quality of cinema due to her status as an opera singer by working to develop the aesthetic appreciation of film acting. Such rhetoric is curious, of course, that the perceptions of grandiosity and talent of the operatic diva, a figure closely associated with sound, was meant to inscribe these expressive qualities into the production of a diva commodity for cinema by exchanging sonic for

²⁰⁴ "The Dumb *Carmen* Happy," *Photoplay*, September 1915, 57.

artistic value. To this point, in Farrar's comments, the limitations of the early cinematic medium are overlooked through an appreciation of cinema's technological methods by which issues of performance provide for a greater level of expressivity through editing as an alternative to the concept of live performance in theater.

Recalling national identities rooted in the democratic promise of the U.S. republic, Farrar also represented an embodiment of national pride particularly through her devotion to opera. While editorials in *Opera Magazine: Devoted to the Higher Forms of Musical Art* played out debates about music genres and vernacular lyrics, articles in the magazine also worked to praise the emergence of "American Women in Grand Opera." Charlotte Cowles, in writing the article, celebrates the emergence of this stage persona in Clara Louise Kellogg for her intervention in existing stage traditions of the 19th-century where most of opera's performers received their training in Europe. These conditions reflected, in Cowles's framing, the inadequacies of proper preparation in the United States for such cultivated singing and Puritanical feeling about the dramatic stage.²⁰⁵ Within this framing, the American diva, reflective of national questions of identity, seemed to embody the national spirit of determined individualism:

Let no one attempt it who does not recognize its difficulties, but once recognizing them, let the operatic student remember that the energy and accomplishments of this nation as an aggregate but reflect the energy and accomplishments of its individuals, and that no one can surpass the American girl in anything she undertakes to do, if she is determined to do it.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Charlotte Cowles, "American Women in Grand Opera: Splendid Record of Achievement by Native Singers, Extending Over Half a Century," *Opera Magazine: Devoted to the Higher Forms of Musical Art*, January 1916, 10.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

Moreover, this aspect of patriotism, represented within the context of World War I, showed how certain ideologies of gendered individualism were also specifically framed in national terms through certain discourses of opera within the period. Yet, moreover, as the diva came to embody ideologies of American-ness, discourses about the cultural refinement of cinema played out in similar publication venues as an entreaty from cinema to opera-going publics. Writing on the development of theatrical entertainment within cinema, E.H. Bierstadt discusses in *Opera Magazine* about the resistances to the cinematograph as belonging to the box holders of the public whose dismissal of cinema as an art reflected a classist suspicion that “nothing could be purchased for so small a sum,” i.e. cinema’s ticket prices, “except perhaps a book of stamps or a box of cigarettes, that was worthy of their serious esteem.”²⁰⁷ Praising Farrar’s transition into cinema, Bierstadt applauds the anti-commercialism of *Carmen*’s producers, whose efforts, apparently, “could hardly hope... to make more than a very small profit on the picture as a whole.”²⁰⁸ Eschewing this commercialism, Bierstadt concludes using a democratic language of nationalism, “The keynote of it all perhaps may best be found by reverting once more to the point that moving pictures like the phonograph, both universalize and democratize art. The time is past when any field of artistic activity is confined to an essentially aristocratic environment.”²⁰⁹

These echoes in opera criticism of Farrar’s giving respectability to cinema seemed to repeat the motifs of Farrar’s stardom in the fan press. In such publications, notions of her middle-class respectability frequently worked to position her within mythologies of American-ness: “This is the story of a very simple American girl, whose natural gifts, perseverance, energy, and wonderful-

²⁰⁷ E.H. Bierstadt, “Opera in Moving Pictures: Development of this Branch of Theatrical Entertainment is Assuming Noteworthy Proportions,” *Opera Magazine: Devoted to the Higher Forms of Musical Art*, October 1915, 30.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

mind have made her one of the most talked of women in the world.”²¹⁰ Indeed, writing after the release of *Carmen*, there are multiple testimonies of Farrar’s successful voice, about which David Belasco, a theatrical producer credited with bringing stage talent like Mary Pickford and Barbara Stanwyck into Hollywood film production, would observe: “If she lost her singing voice today, she would still be the greatest dramatic actress in America.”²¹¹ Movie mogul Jesse Lasky was recorded as saying nearly the same, reflecting the types of publicity and control exerted over her star image even within the new emergent cultural conditions of 1910s Hollywood film culture: “If she lost both voices, singing and speaking, she would still be the greatest motion picture artist I have ever seen.”²¹² While music criticism had eschewed such commercialism, film criticism had openly invited it, referring to Farrar’s accomplishment of having sold a million phonographic records. Moreover, her presentation in this *Photoplay* profile announced the diva as a specifically national and, perhaps, *nationalist* figure, particularly as she marked out American claims to the world stage. Geraldine Farrar, the article notes, was educated within an atmosphere of music, an atmosphere that influenced her remarkable career in Berlin and other European capitals on the opera stage. These biographic details included her youth, noting that she was only nineteen when she made her debut at the Royal Opera in Berlin in October 1901 before receiving special invitations from the Kaiser of Germany. This life—as it would be so often recounted in her publicity statements—was left behind to perform regularly at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Here, Farrar seemed to embody modern ideologies of American exceptionalism following the sheer amount of industrial output and wealth generated by the industrial revolution that had announced the arrival of the Gilded Age. Against the heights of the German operatic

²¹⁰ Morris Gest, “Farrar—That’s All,” *Photoplay*, December 1915, 105.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*

tradition, Farrar seemed to embody the ambitions of the United States as being on equal artistic footing in the realm of high culture:

She is the only American singer who has ever been received at the Metropolitan on the same terms of equality as the foreign stars who have dominated our opera for so many years. She is the only prima donna who has successfully fought—and conquered—all opposition at the Metropolitan, where today she reigns.²¹³

In this way, the example of the diva in the early 20th-century illustrates how, as figures of national modernity, the diva came to signify notions of gendered and class belonging, citizenship, and national identity in ways that would be called upon throughout the 20th-century.

Within this context, Farrar's career in the film industry reflected the crystallization of the diva commodity in its modern form, marked by the distinction of opera's branding as a consumer good inscribed within broader practices of cultural uplift. Facilitated and appropriated by cinema's early producers, this diva commodity, first identified in the phonograph industry, aimed to settle the public anxieties about urban space and women in cinema, while working to manage the broader perception of cinema as a medium of popular, sensational attractions. Situated here is not only the commodification of gender but the gendering of media technologies that is so essential to understanding how the development of commercial entertainment systems in the early-20th century worked to inscribe themselves within the social relations of the period. Viewed through this lens, the diva commodity, in its myriad forms, would, crucially, offer these commercial systems audience-going publics; yet more than this, the diva commodity also provided specific ways of framing cultural consumption as a civilizational good that, through the interventions of these

²¹³ Gest, "Farrar—That's All," *Photoplay*, 107.

decades, came to evince clear features of nationalism in the branding terms of everyday identification with cinema as a cultural medium. This history, of course, is not totalizing – one among many *histories* that show the class and gendered dimensions of cinema’s emergence in this period. Against this qualification, however, is the recognition of the roots of the diva commodity as deeply reflective of the class, cultural, and national anxieties of the United States during late 19th-century industrialization. Examining the ensuing decades of U.S. cultural history, the history of the Black diva and her commodification reveals how this framing of a civilizational good could be used in positioning cultural consumption as a contested site of national belonging, citizenship, and social activism. Within this history is the recognition of how the Civil Rights Movement, and its influence on women’s and queer liberation, would provide new typologies of the diva that provided commodified visions of an inclusive nation. The Black diva, importantly, would work to contest some of the ethnic and racial dimensions of her white counterpart, while retaining the classist, because consumerist, mode of address of this commodity form – the subject of Chapter Two.

Chapter Two:

Charting the Mid-Century Black Diva: Performing Against the Color Line

“Fully aware of the magnificent quality of her voice and its phenomenal character, that of singing a higher and a lower note than either of her great contemporaries, Kate Hayes and Jenny Lind, she yet did not rest content, as most of our climbing artists under the same circumstances would do with the same enthusiastic plaudits elicited by their performances. She, no doubt, considered the racial circumstances by which she was surrounded and the tremendous artistic standard she must retain; therefore, diligently she applied herself to a more scientific cultivation of a voice of natural power, well-high marvelous, as well as to the acquiring of a scholarly knowledge of the principles of general music.”

- Frankye A. Dixon, “Music: Elizabeth Taylor-Greenfield, “The Black Swan,”” (1929)²¹⁴

“Some white companies whose sales have been affected by the sale of our records are using a few short-sighted colored people in establishing a Jim Crow Annex to their business. They hope to rid themselves of our competition in that way and to reduce the Negro singer and musician to the same status he had before we entered the field.”

-“Every Time You Buy a Black SWAN RECORD,” *The Crisis* (1922)²¹⁵

By the year of the international release of Jean-Jacques Beineix’s *Diva* (1981), the figure of the American Black diva had become a compelling image in the history of performance and music celebrity and its increasing representation across the nation’s global media industries. The film centers on the character of Jules, a postman, who makes a pirated recording of the American Cynthia Hawkins (played by real-life soprano Wilhelmenia Fernandez) in her performance of Catalani’s “La Wally.” The recording is significant as Hawkins expresses anxieties about her recorded voice as a detriment to the art of her performance’s liveness, a fear that recalls, in certain ways, early anxieties about the introduction of recorded music discussed in Chapter One. Privileging this liveness and its relationship to an audience, Hawkins states: “I need my public. A concert is a privileged moment for the artist and her audience. It’s a unique moment. Music, it comes and goes. Don’t try to keep it... Business should adapt to art, not the other way around.”²¹⁶ When Jules loses the recording to Taiwanese con-artists, a racist representation of global fears of

²¹⁴ Frankye A. Dixon, “Music: Elizabeth Taylor-Greenfield, “The Black Swan,”” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 17, 1929, 11.

²¹⁵ “Advertisement: Every Time You Buy a Black Swan Record,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 23, No. 3, January 1922, 137.

²¹⁶ *Diva*, DVD, Directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix (Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2001).

music piracy of recorded music in the 1980s, these thieves attempt to coerce Hawkins into a recording contract against her wishes. When describing the relationship of *Diva* to its contemporary moment, Beineix has stated:

In a way, I just took advantage of what was in the air of the '80s...which was the encounter of rock & roll and classic music, the encounter of publicity and daily life. The difference between a film like *Diva* and a commercial is that a commercial is using all the things you can have in a film, except that at the moment of happiness — the climax — they put the product; they use the emotion to sell something. A good moviemaker will never, ever do that, because the purpose is to sell an idea with the emotion. It leads you somewhere, but not to buy a product.²¹⁷

Though written in *Diva*'s aftermath and the expansion of racialized genres of sound in music industry from the 1980s onward, Patricia Hill Collins's observation of how systems of advertising position "black people's bodies as valuable commodities" is a compelling frame of reference in tracing the contextualizing history of Hawkins's performance of the Black diva.²¹⁸ Positioning attention to fears of technological reproduction and coercive Black female commodification, *Diva* embodies the historical struggle over the symbolic economy of the Black female body as a cultural commodity. Echoing these sentiments, fears of the diva's reproduction are realized in visual terms, a connection that is asserted and re-configured as a repeating refrain within the film. In one shot, Hawkins enters onto the opera stage, visible through the reflection of her image in the sunglasses of an audience member. The mirrored image, taking a cue from the cinematic and visual

²¹⁷ Scott Foundas, "Back in Blue: Battered But Not Broken, Jean-Jacques Beineix Returns," *LA Weekly*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.laweekly.com/back-in-blue-battered-but-not-broken-jean-jacques-beineix-returns>.

²¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, "New Commodities, New Consumers: Selling Blackness in a Global Marketplace," *Ethnicities*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2006): 311.

experiments of the French New Wave, connects back to the film's central preoccupations with mediation, authenticity, and commodification that plagued post-war imaginings of the "Americanization" of the French economy. At the same time, these preoccupations parallel the forms of exploitative commodification that mark the colonial histories, still lingering, of the Black female body in media industry. While contemporary foci of analysis have paid attention to prominent figures as Beyoncé within this tradition of the Black diva, scholars have often neglected the history of the Black diva's commodification as a grounding genealogy of contemporary Black female celebrity.²¹⁹ It is within these themes that Beineix's *Diva* recovers the peculiarity of this figure as both historical and modern – a figure who summons ideologies of cultural and racial uplift, the promises of an integrated global society while reflecting the unequal terms of technology's commodification of Black female bodies in the marketplace. Offering a window into this history, *Diva* represents a text within a historical archive in which the blurring of high and low categories of art takes place. Importantly, this history is narratively explored through its coercive effects on transforming Black female artists into cultural commodities.

Aspects of this analysis have played out in the scholarship on *Diva*. Beineix's work has posed a compelling object of inquiry for understanding the situation of Black female performers in modern media industries. Grappling with the cultural stakes of *Diva*, the film, too, has been also bene incorporated into feminist film analysis as a means of advancing theories of the female image.²²⁰ Critiquing the racial absences that permeated the foundations of similar analyses,

²¹⁹ See: Jaap Kooijman, "Fierce, Fabulous, and In/Famous: Beyonce as Black Diva," *Popular Music and Society* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2019): 6-21; Robin James, "'Robo-Diva R&B': Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2009): 402-423.

²²⁰ Carina Yervasi, "Capturing the Elusive Representations in Beineix's "Diva," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1993): 38-46.

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn observes within these traditional readings an inattentiveness to the film's lessons about commodification and multinational trade:

Diva quite cleverly ties together an abundance of related themes based on the symbol of woman as commodity traded by men. On one level there is the prostitution ring; on the other, the pirating and fighting (by Jules, by the diva's male manager, and by the Taiwanese businessmen) over the ownership and marketing of the diva's voice— female flesh and female cultural production, both controlled and marketed by men.²²¹

In noting these aspects, Karlyn invites a reading of the film that is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of the modern diva, so often figured in terms of Black womanhood, as representative of the state of modern media industries, “while we might ask if the diva is first an American, a woman, or a Black, the film shows that she, like the prostitutes, is first a commodity on the international market.”²²² Though eliding class distinctions between Hawkins's opera singer and the sex workers featured in the film, Rowe poses critically valuable questions about this process of commodified blackness. If *Diva* is, in fact, an allegory, then we must ask, in non-diegetic terms, what is its referent? What is this Black opera diva's commodity? And what does it reveal about the relationship of race and cultural industry? How might these thematic elements and motifs be usable in studying the history and allegorical significance of this ‘diva’ in the late-20th-century?

Diva provides three competing answers to the question of this commodity. Its first answer, of course, is the issue of the musical commodity itself. In the film, this musical commodity is yet to exist, as its production hinges on the coercion of Cynthia Hawkins in recording an album against

²²¹ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, “Class and Allegory in Jameson's Film Criticism,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1990): 10.

²²² *Ibid.*

her fear of losing financial control over her live vocal presence in the marketplace. A second answer, embodying also Karlyn's criticism of Frederic Jameson's inadequate attention to questions of gender and race, is the body itself whose race and gender can themselves be viewed as types of commodities historically, particularly when understanding the history of the Black female body as a situated object of study within its commodification by the phonograph and Hollywood media industries.²²³ In the film, these issues are intimated through the racial logic of production, in which Jules's illegal appropriation of Hawkins's voice through mechanical reproduction recalls the racial hierarchies of media ownership in the early 20th-century. At the same time, Jules's sense of whiteness in the film is set against the use of Taiwanese media pirates whose signaling of racist fears underscores, in the film's own terms, the racial tensions of music as a commodity. Moreover, the third answer to this question is Hawkins's commodity of her *self* as a celebrity performer. In contrast to this first answer, this sense of self refers back to the agency Hawkins has over her own work, voice, and body within this system of media production and distribution that achieves value as a commodity through her skill as a technical performer. This value is figured both economically and culturally, particularly through the inclusion of Hawkins's relationship with Jules. In fact, the protagonist of the film, Jules, is narratively situated in terms of Hawkins as a fan himself, pointing to the historical exigencies of celebrity as it moved from a system of aristocratic patronage to the maintenance of a paying audience for one's work through systems of promotion and publicity.²²⁴

²²³ For Jameson's reading on *Diva* (1981) see: Frederic Jameson, "Diva and French Socialism," in *Signatures of the Visible* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 55-63.

²²⁴ In the film's 2007 screening at the Film Forum, critics noted elements of the growth of a toxic fan culture in the film's plot: "the young fan is so obsessed with the diva, that he also steals the dress she wore at the concert and rides through the streets on his moped with it flung like a scarf around his neck. The whole scenario is hilariously bizarre, and can be compared to today's celebrity crazed fans that stalk, chase and use their cellphones to click pictures of their favorite singers or actors, or even the music and DVD pirates who rip off and exploit various factions of the entertainment industry." See: "Beineix' *Diva* 'Keeps on Keeping on' at the Film Forum," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 8, 2007, 22.

In drawing out these answers, the diva's body, within the film, represents an object with competing commodity interests that play out a range of her own desires and others'.

These mutually overlapping and reinforcing aspects of the Black diva as commodity help raise critical historical questions about the commodified female body in music production, branding, and commercialized performance traditions. For this reason, Beineix's work represents a compelling text about the changes in music production, visual display, and commodification that have marked the legibility of Black female stardom within the cultural marketplace. At the same time, *Diva* illustrates intersecting gender and racial dynamics of popular music stardom at the turn of the 1980s in how the phenomenon of the diva had migrated from institutions of opera in which the Black diva was forged as a discourse fundamental to ideologies of racial uplift into re-invigorated systems of popular music commodification through sound and motion picture industry. This history, as we will cover, is instructive about the historical contestation over the Black female body within the branding discourses furnished for her commodification as a site of cultural and political significance, a dynamic significantly informing the typologies of diva celebrity featured within VH1's series of charity concerts starting in the late 1990s.

This chapter examines this history of the Black diva's commodification within the context of the phonograph industry by charting how this body's symbolic economy was organized by music criticism, industrial genre categories, and promotional branding discourses. Necessary to understand within this context are the racial histories of sound through what Jennifer Lynn Stoeber has referred to as the "sonic color line" to understand how the racial organization of power in the U.S. figured into racialized listening practices. These racial histories of sound make us perceptible to how the Black diva's body has been contested through ideologies of race that inflect her performative staging of Black women's autonomy over their cultural production. Ideologies of

racial uplift, influenced by the emergence of a Black middle-class within the historical realities of post-Reconstruction America, were situated within a context in which combating forms of racism anchored in ideologies of biological difference sought to dismantle perceptions of racial inferiority through cultural discernment. Against the racist caricatures of minstrel performance, these divas employed self-presentational strategies—later re-figured as self-promotional in the context of emergent media industries of the 20th-century—that reflected the historical struggle of African American women to wrest control over the symbolic economy of Black womanhood and therefore blackness as a whole. Situated in periods where political representation was forcefully denied to these communities, the Black diva’s performance against this sonic color line – and indeed the non-sonic embodiments of racial boundaries in the U.S. – have reflected broader debates that fuse performance practices as central to constructions and imaginations of citizenship by contesting the cultural representation of blackness as a meaningful category in public life. To be sure, not all Black divas within this period worked to present themselves as representations of their race, yet the racial conditions of these periods, such as they were, required careful calibrations and performances of their blackness to manage public tensions. Through this lens, the re-deployment of these performance traditions in the context of the phonograph and Hollywood recording industries illustrates these debates about racial authenticity, performance, and how cultural commodities have been figured as foundational to political practice. Embodying this legacy, the Black diva, as she became identified within the convergences between the music industry, Hollywood, and television, has continued to embody these debates as an avatar of citizenship. Reflecting on this recognition, this chapter charts the historical contestation over the Black female diva as a commodity by industrial genre categories, audiences, artists, and cultural producers to the mid-century where this Black diva took on a new charge within the context of the Civil Rights

Movement. In doing so, I argue that this vision of diva celebrity, rooted in the racialization of cultural uplift ideology, has been foundationally reflective of the struggles over the symbolic and financial economy of Black artists in media industries. Moreover, this dynamic has had powerful consequences for understanding how the diva commodity came to be situated within activist modes of consumption for its performance of Black female empowerment.

The Sonic Color Line, Black Divas, and Visual Embodiments of Sound:

In Chapter One, I examined how the figure of the white diva embodied Victorian ideologies of gender through discourses of musical discernment that privileged constructions of operatic sound as part of a broader practice of cultural uplift. Situated within the context of a growing morass of accents in American cities while early listening machines had been situated as public urban amusements within these geographies, the introduction of the phonograph recording industry, by companies like Victor Records and the Edison Phonograph Company, turned to this figure of the operatic diva as part of a broader way of disciplining the reception of both sound technologies and the development of early music consumption through ideologies of connoisseurship. These branding discourses worked, in some ways, to pose cultural consumption as a marker of cultural cache and social class within the changing soundscapes of the city and, thorough such Victrola advertising, domestic life, too. Positioned within this context, the diva as a figure of cultural uplift would be useful in asserting the subjectivity of early Black divas whose performances drew on such ideologies of uplift with distinctly racial connotations, seeking to overcome racial boundaries by embodying Black virtuosity through an array of calculated negotiations with white listening publics, institutions, and sound traditions. Within this context, it is useful to think about the ways that these constructions of diva-ness contested the translation of racial hierarchies into performance traditions of sound and the early commodification of music.

In *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Jennifer Lynn Stoever examines how listening functions “as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance.”²²⁵ Through reading the racial history of listening relations, Stoever attends to sound “as a critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities and structures of racist violence.”²²⁶ Recovering the salience of sound within studies of race, her work joins recent scholarship that troubles traditional critical lenses of race that have privileged visual epistemologies over other senses. Stoever, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of the color line from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), posits this sonic variant to indicate the “socially constructed, historically contingent relationships *between* sight and sound, voice and body—how each collapses into the other at various moments in time—during a complex traffic between the senses.”²²⁷ In studying this history of the 19th-century, the conflict between these sonic and visual epistemologies of race worked dynamically in concert and tension with each other in laying claim to the knowability of the Black female body in performance. Recognizing this dynamic offers a compelling window into how the figure of the Black diva emerged as a performance tradition, among others, that would bear significantly on the historical representation of this figure and Black celebrity within the context of the 20th-century.

At stake in the distinctions between these two epistemological regimes were the conditions for Black female subjectivity itself, where the potency of Black female vocal expression could supersede the visual logics and racist perceptions of the Black body as culturally primitive. Where critics were amazed by the emergence of the Black operatic diva, such as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (c.1817-1876), her vocal brilliance found intense struggle at the level of musical

²²⁵ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 4.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

discourse that privileged the visual peculiarities of her body against the sounds of her voice. Where the white female body had drawn associations with religious and civilizational connotations, the Black diva's voice was inseparable from the visual recognition of her embodied performance of race, particularly as these framings echoed in advertising literature that positioned divas like Greenfield as exceptional representatives of their race. The discursive contestation over the body as a racial subject often reflected larger contestations over the body or corpus of operatic work she performed. To this point, the struggle over Black female subjectivity was observable down to the very naming of the Black diva as a public performer. Greenfield labored underneath the perception of her being the double of white opera singers. Coined by the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, Greenfield became known as the "Black Swan," in an apparent nod to other touring divas like Jenny Lind who was known as the "Swedish Nightingale."²²⁸ Scholars, such as Julia Chybowski, have noted that this sobriquet reflected broader traditions in the 19th-century of naming opera's touring divas with bird nicknames, often reflecting their nationality.²²⁹ Crucially, Lind's nickname illustrates how ideologies of nationality served to inform the reception and performance traditions of these operatic divas, particular as her career seemed to confirm white European associations of cultural uplift through practices of vocal cultivation and music listening. Against this history, Greenfield's name, however, appears positioned within this tradition in a way that posits racial and national identity as analogous to one another, reflecting the racial claims of citizenship that re-emerged in development of the Jim Crow South during Reconstruction. Considerations of nationality were also not removed from the search for subjectivity within her stage name, as newspapers of the period, as Chybowski notes, contested Greenfield's naming through other

²²⁸ "A Black Swan!" *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, October 10, 1851.

²²⁹ Julia J. Chybowski, "Becoming the "Black Swan" in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's Early Life and Debut Concert Tour," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2014): 143.

monikers as varied as the “Swan of Africa,” “African Black Bird,” “African nightingale,” and “colored Jenny Lind.”²³⁰ Reflecting the contestation over the originality and subjectivity of the Black female performing body and voice, Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1868-1933), following in her wake, would be known as “Black Patti,” in an apparent reference to the internationally-renown Italian diva Adelina Patti. By underscoring such operatic figures as Black counterparts to white divas, this naming, in critical ways, reflected attempts to naturalize white racial ownership over music, performance, and civilization itself.

While these stage names reflected the binds and boundaries of the Black diva as a ‘public’ subject in the press, Greenfield’s performances also reflected the contestation of this body in a context where segregated conditions of the American stage were quite common. Nina Sun Eidsheim has worked to show the interrelations between sound and image when considering how the vocal timbre and characteristics of Black classical singers in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century were viewed, for white audiences, as inseparable from their visual and physical features, reflecting, for Eidsheim, how “visual blackness was projected onto auditory timbre, resulting in the perception of sonic blackness.”²³¹ A term referring to the visual contingencies of race within the listening relations of sound, public performances by Greenfield were forced to contend with the fore histories of the Black body. This history, as Eidsheim notes, was rooted in the fact that white audiences had first encountered the Black performing body in enslavement and made the object of derogatory stereotypes and images through minstrel performances.²³² Public reception of Greenfield frequently reflected a violent recognition of her voice’s racial embodiment. While

²³⁰ *Liberator* (Boston), October 31, 1851; *Sandusky (Ohio) Register*, January 19, 1852; *Buffalo (New York) Daily Express*, October 23, 1851; *Lowell (Massachusetts) Monitor*, February 14, 1852. Quoted in Chybowski, “Becoming the Black Swan,” 134-35.

²³¹ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 74-75.

²³² *Ibid*, 78.

reports of Greenfield's voice had featured her ability to hit both higher and lower notes than her peers, one letter to the editor in *The Louisville Daily Journal*, while noting the delight of her audience, doubted if Greenfield's voice "could ever be trained to high artistic finish." Against this doubt, the letter also re-positioned Greenfield's vocal abilities to imply an almost deviant sense of womanhood in her performance, "but the way she rolled out those great bass notes, we have never before heard equaled by a woman."²³³ Even where Greenfield was praised, its language was filtered through rhetoric structured by perceived linkages between race and class, where one review in *The New York Herald* suggested her "a fine looking woman, of low stature, but most magnificent roundabout proportions." On the level of dress, this same review seemed to contest Greenfield's status in terms of fashion, clearly gendered and by the paragraph's end also racialized, claiming:

She was dressed simply and neatly, in a low-body blue silk dress, with a deep lace collar, and wore some white flower ornaments in her hair. Her tout ensemble was, if not captivating, at least pleasing. The ladies, as usual, criticized her appearance ... and we were struck with the appositeness of one lady's remark, who said she admired the Swan most because she had "so much pluck, and was, in fact, such a sassy n*****."²³⁴

Grotesque and reflective of the racism of the period, the appositeness of the remark is particularly illustrative of attempts to discern Greenfield's status within the context of opera, as ideologies of race, gender, and class are put into tension with each other through the Black diva's operatic body. Moreover, the remark also serves to memorialize the much longer history of the ways in which the Black female body, in particular, has been referred to as having an inherent "sassiness" or "attitude," remarks that frequently conceal networks of racial signification, such as casting and

²³³ A.H.C., "Letter to the Editor," *The Louisville Daily Journal*, May 3, 1852, 2.

²³⁴ "The Black Swan's Concert," *The New York Herald*, April 1, 1853, 5. Censoring of this racial epithet reflects the emphasis of this dissertation's author.

advertising in modern terms, that structure these readings of Black women and their bodies. While such language of reception has been thought to be an example of a latently racist reception practice of enjoying Black women for their energy within a post-Civil Rights context, this review's example illustrates that such language has much deeper histories than usually recognized, while embodying how the visual reckoning with Greenfield's voice so often sought to position her in terms of gender deviancy due to the visual effect of her publicly "raced" body. Against this context, the chasm between her voice and appearance provided a collision usually remarked upon in her performance reviews – and perhaps, even echoed in the tour announcements by Greenfield's manager, Col. Wood, that sought to capture public fascination around this racial and musical dissonance. Crucially, this dissonance was rooted within the enjoining of ideologies of gender, genre, and sound as they were made observable in the reception of Greenfield's work. Reflective of this dynamic, one review in the *Wisconsin Free Democrat* would state: "We see the face of the Black woman, but we hear the voice of an angel."²³⁵

Such performances of race, it should be noted, are not necessarily a foundational property of the Black performer, rather they reflect a range of perceptions that all artists must labor under in their creative work. However, this performance of race takes on historical resonance due to the ways in which Black performers have struggled to gain access to dominant institutions of culture, social representation, and politics. Many of these historical realities are rooted in the ways that Black performers are martialled into discourse in ways that are heavily racialized and, whether conscious or not to their critics, project "the burden of representation" that Kobena Mercer describes in his exploration of how artists "positioned in the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as 'representatives' in the

²³⁵ *Wisconsin Free Democrat* (Milwaukee), April 21, 1852.

sense that they are expected to 'speak for' the black communities from which they come."²³⁶ Complicating the rhetoric of anti-racist art criticism, Mercer details how public discourses of art frequently seek to clarify the role of the artist but yield frames that authenticate "the very essence of one's identity as a black subject."²³⁷ Analyzing how debates of authenticity constrain the work of Black artists, Mercer contends that:

Black artists as actors and agents of 'representation' in the public sphere ... show how, in this role, their work bears the weight of the double meaning of the term. 'Representation' concerns not only practices of depiction or textual production, but practices of delegation and substitution such that, at the point of reception, the black artist is expected to speak for the Black communities as if she or he were its political 'representative'.²³⁸

Mercer, while discussing controversies in a contemporary art exhibition, offers critical lessons about how debates about cultural representation privilege the role of Black artists as authentic representations of their communities, "as a consequence of structures that have historically marginalized their access to the means of cultural production."²³⁹ For this reason, we might examine how Greenfield's "Black Swan" persona came to navigate the burden of representation that reflected the conscious and unconscious ways in which she performed her racial identity in her career, while recognizing how her performances were also burdened by this expectation of representativeness in ways that sought to define and narrow the terms of reception for her body's public visibility. In recognizing these circumstances, I read Greenfield's performing body as one

²³⁶ Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (1990): 62.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 71.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

²³⁹ *Ibid*.

that represents a gathering space in which racial ideologies were enacted and contested, hoping to determine the social and political resonances of her operatic voice.

Observable in this context, the Black diva's performing body is met with affective excess as it draws upon the imaginary resources of identity as both the subject and object of racial representation through visual rhetoric as of that used by Greenfield's critics. Nicole Fleetwood, in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011), analyzes performance through the acknowledgement that bodies in performance are always already troubled by the histories of their social identity. Her work attends to this issue through an attention on the role of how performance works in excess of the body and summons notions of an embodied enactment of race. Tracking "the affective power of the circulation of blackness," Fleetwood explains that "Blackness, in this sense, circulates. It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing... Blackness fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon."²⁴⁰ Performances that take up their role as distinct enactments of a bodily identity – i.e. they take up the claim of the body as being representative – deliberately perform this objectified visibility and, as Fleetwood argues, beg us "to consider the constructed nature" of "the black body in the visual field, but more broadly with how blackness gets attached to bodies, goods, ideas, and aesthetic practices in the visual sphere."²⁴¹ Such performances of social identity mark the body as "a figuration of hypervisibility" by emphasizing the body's status as a visible object or manifestation of social identity. Fleetwood illustrates how this notion can be applied to Black performers whose work emphasizes their blackness and its historical construction as a visual discourse. For her, this performative excess, what she borrows from Hortense Spillers as 'excess

²⁴⁰ Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 20.

flesh,' is a strategy of masquerade that “does not destabilize the dominant gaze or its system of visibility,” but rather “refracts the gaze back upon itself” by challenging critics to identify “what constitutes a productive and positive representation.”²⁴² Fleetwood’s theory provides us with key insights through which the performance of this socially representative body draws upon and challenges the embodied histories of its audience.

In order to evaluate the consequences of how this sonic color line impacts the self-conscious performance and presentation of the Black diva through the prisms of gender and race, I turn towards performance studies scholar Uri McMillan’s innovative approach in analyzing Black female subjectivity in relationship to the performing body. In *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, McMillan traces critical genealogies of Black female performance artists’ self-objectification of their bodies in their art. McMillan analyzes performance practices that center what he terms a ‘purposeful objecthood’ that “rescripts how Black female bodies move and are perceived by others.”²⁴³ Chronicling performative acts of blackness, McMillan relates how performing objecthood “becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places.”²⁴⁴ Moreover, McMillan notes the difficulties in thinking about objecthood as a performative strategy, since “black performance art’s usage of the black body as its artistic medium is especially loaded when confronting a historical legacy of objectification and the generations of slaves who did not legally own the bodies they acted with.”²⁴⁵ McMillan positions his work as an attempt to scramble “the dichotomy between objectified bodies or

²⁴² Ibid,112.

²⁴³ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 8.

embodied subjects by reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity.”²⁴⁶ In performing such objecthood, McMillan interrogates the potential for forms of subjectivity and agency to emerge as artists take up their bodies and social identities as the objects of their work. I mobilize this reading of performed objecthood, Fleetwood’s attention to this ‘excess flesh’ that reflects the dehumanizing conditions of the Antebellum period, as part of the undergirding of my conceptual approach in thinking through how the reception of the Black diva body channels, contests, and represents social identity as a visually knowable object through performance. McMillan frames this purposeful objecthood, in his discussion of Black female subjectivity as “a way toward agency rather than its antithesis, as a strategy rather than a primal site of injury?”²⁴⁷ Stressing this potential for agency reflects the need to read performative bodies of Black womanhood like Greenfield’s within the political and cultural conditions of her period to understand the ways that careful calibrations and presentational strategies of performing blackness in public reflect historically real ways that such Black subjects have worked to resist the structural boundaries of race as a lived experience.

Greenfield’s emergence as a touring figure reflected careful negotiations of the color line by appropriating symbols of respectability, none more so, perhaps, than the positioning of her body to white audiences. This negotiation entailed strategic uses of institutions and publications to organize an interested audience, as Sara Lampert writes, to cohere to gendered and racialized conventions of classical performance in the 19th-century.²⁴⁸ For instance, as Lampert chronicles, this mode of self-presentational politics found Greenfield cultivating ties with some of Buffalo’s leading reform-minded white citizens to position her performance within shifting racial views of

²⁴⁶ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 9.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴⁸ Sara Lampert, “Black Swan/White Raven: The Racial Politics of Elizabeth Greenfield’s American Concert Career, 1851-1855,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2016): 83.

the 1850s, in which anti-slavery sentiment grew to new heights in the preview to the Civil War. This practice tended to be followed where Greenfield went, as her career often entailed private performances in residences before her on-stage debut within a city. Crucially, such performances served as not only introductions to Greenfield within the context of her disruption of the traditional racial politics of performance space, but these performances also served as public relations that were reported in the press to foster more interest in her upcoming concerts. Reviews in the *Buffalo Daily Express* seemed deliberately positioning of Greenfield in terms of music connoisseurship, reporting “She is countenanced and especially patronized by distinguished Silver Greys and comprise men, so that while we congratulate a worthy member of a proscribed race upon her remarkable success, we can assure the public that the Union is in no degree periled by it.”²⁴⁹ In this context, it seemed that the sympathetic press, whether furnished by Greenfield herself or later conduits, reflected strategies of containment around the racial significance of her performance, even as her marketability was premised on her exceptional character as a spectacle of Black womanhood. Among other strategies included public reporting on Greenfield’s manager Col. Wood, whose whiteness, it appears, seemed to proffer Greenfield a level of racial respectability commensurate—within the racial perceptions of the day—with her prodigious vocal talents. In the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, Greenfield entered a three-year contract with Wood to organize concerts in the U.S. and Europe. Within the announcement of this business relationship, the newspaper claimed that this partnership ensured that “there is no doubt that her career will be alike honorable and profitable, both to herself and her business manager.”²⁵⁰ For example, Greenfield’s

²⁴⁹ *Buffalo (New York) Daily Express*, October 23, 1851.

²⁵⁰ *Buffalo (New York) Commercial Advertiser*, December 22, 1851.

use of a white manager, Col. Wood, was pivotal for adding a sense of professionalism to her touring operation.

A reprint of an Ohio review in the *Detroit Daily Advertiser* in 1852 showed the promotional strategies that were used to introduce Greenfield to the public. Within this framing, Greenfield's touring manager, Col. Wood, represented part of a larger entreaty to white audiences and publications to position the framing and reception of Greenfield's performing body. Wood had staged invitations to members of the press to the residence of a Dr. Price so that they could see a preview of Greenfield's exceptional voice. The press would comment on the warm relationship between Greenfield and Price as long friends, even going so far as to suggest a somewhat paternalistic relationship between them, noting that his parlor piano was the same one she had used around in her early training.²⁵¹ Within this context, the performer's career was explicitly put into public discourse in white patriarchal terms, reflecting broader strategies of how marketing and performance criticism in the press employed such strategies of containment to control the potentially disruptive racial significance of Greenfield's career.

While sympathetic discourses about Greenfield positioned her in terms of patriarchal and white racial authority, negative criticism frequently sought to reclaim musical authority over her vocal talents using rhetoric laced with ideologies of Black racial primitivism. In 1853, following Greenfield's performance on the London stage at Stafford House, one critic, despite noting the considerable range of the diva's voice, wrote "she has a voice and some feeling for singing pathetic ballads, but nothing more, and nothing else."²⁵² At root in the rejection of Greenfield's talent was the perception of her inability to perform sacred songs like Himmel's "Sound the Trump" due to

²⁵¹ *Detroit Daily Advertiser*, April 3, 1852.

²⁵² "The Black Swan in London," *The Daily Dispatch*, June 15, 1853, 2.

its subtlety of melody, while noting particularly her “utter failure” to handle a high running passage in “Home, Sweet Home.”²⁵³ Curiously, this song had received specific praise by *The New York Herald* almost a year later in a performance that was noted as her “most faultless if not her most astounding performance,” despite mentioning the marring effects of her English pronunciations.²⁵⁴ Consistent in both these reviews, however, was the specific attention to what the listeners heard as her untrained voice. The London review noted:

At present her voice is perfectly uncultivated, and she continually sings sharp, probably from a certain natural shrillness of tone which distinguishes the organ. . . . At any rate, we would counsel no more concerts until Miss Greenfield’s vocalism be educated by long study and hard practice; and then we have our fears, again, that public curiosity would be blunted, and that no one would go to hear a vocality not because she was a first rate artist, but because she was a woman of color.²⁵⁵

Not without its contemporary parallels, *The New York Herald* echoed this reference to her voice as “deficient in the science and cultivation.”²⁵⁶ Rooted in these discourses, perhaps, were attempts to associate Greenfield with cultural primitivism, ignoring, as Chybowski notes, the fact that the diva, indeed, had been formally schooled and privately tutored. Calling her voice natural or the diva “a child of nature” reflected the “belief in the innate musical ability of African Americans and the habit of infantilizing adults,” Chybowski writes, “were common features of mid-nineteenth-century racial stereotypes.”²⁵⁷ Within this context, Greenfield’s voice, trained as it was, often was treated as not only an embodiment of her race but also denied operatic authority.

²⁵³ “The Black Swan in London,” *The Daily Dispatch*, 2.

²⁵⁴ “The Black Swan and the Duchess of Sutherland,” *The New York Herald*, June 10, 1853, 2.

²⁵⁵ “The Black Swan in London,” *The Daily Dispatch*, 2.

²⁵⁶ “The Black Swan and the Duchess of Sutherland,” *The New York Herald*, 2.

²⁵⁷ Chybowski, “Becoming the “Black Swan,”” 147.

At the same time, Greenfield's performances carried a complicated legacy for African American communities and abolitionist readerships of the period. Indeed, evidence of this ambivalence towards the diva's presence in more elite venues often reflected the ways in which her body's symbolic economy was at stake for racial reformers *and* white publics of the period. In May 1852, William G. Allen wrote a letter to Frederick Douglass's Paper positioning Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield as an embodiment of "the African race... verifying the prediction that they will yet produce singers and instrumental performers such as the world has never yet seen, neither read of nor heard of."²⁵⁸ This sentiment was often originally echoed in the Black and abolitionist press who saw in Greenfield's success the conclusion that "We are only beginning to contribute our share to the common progress, and see with what tropical exuberance."²⁵⁹ Against this optimism of Greenfield's performance career, there also became a steady stream of negative letters and editorials about her relationship to these white audiences, particularly as it became noted that she seemed to be complicit with the legal structures of segregation and white supremacy while touring. Indeed, negative sentiment had gathered in the Black and abolitionist press against Col. Wood, as in another story by abolitionist and journalist Martin Delany recounted vividly the racial grievances of Greenfield for dismissing her former Black manager and hiring Wood. Most offensive of Wood's alleged behavior within this account was his participation in pro-slavery legal practices, having allegedly run a museum in Cincinnati that provided notice that no people of color would be admitted, while also associating him with support of the Fugitive Slave Law.²⁶⁰ Observable in the historical record is the continuation of segregated conditions of Greenfield's touring, though it is disputed whether such segregation was a defining feature of her performances.

²⁵⁸ William G. Allen, "Letter from Wm. G. Allen," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, May 20, 1852.

²⁵⁹ New York Correspondent, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, March 9, 1855.

²⁶⁰ Martin R. Delany, "Letter from M.R. Delany," *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, April 22, 1853.

John I. Gaines, writing in *Voice of the Fugitive*, described his encounter of being thrown out of one of Greenfield's recitals, despite his purchase of tickets and clean appearance, over the color of his skin. Curiously, in the letter, Gaines describes how he and his company had been able to see Jenny Lind the year before, yet not Greenfield. Reflecting on the painful experience of racial exclusion and segregation, the letter took issue with her manager for participating in such a "barbaric" custom. Unclear is whether adherence to these practices were enforced by theater management as a possibility of controlling the reception context of Greenfield's voice or whether this resulted through agreement between Greenfield and Wood before its negotiation with the theaters. Yet even as Greenfield's virtuosity was celebrated as an avatar for the potential of Black racial progress, negative perceptions also followed over the contestation of public space that marked her performances. Frequently positioned within this criticism was the belief that Greenfield had not done enough to advance the cause of abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* published an editorial that accused Greenfield of not remembering her slavery past:

Does she remember her former state—the pit from which she was digged! Not a bit of it. Does she tune her sweet voice to sing of freedom? Seldom does she paint the sorrows of slavery—its cruelties, its tortures, its barbarities! We never heard of it. Does she sing to her own down-trodden race, or in any way try to elevate them? No.²⁶¹

Through these encounters, Greenfield reflected a contestation over the symbolic economy of the Black woman's performing body as a diva figure. And for their parts, Greenfield and her manager Col. Wood's decision-making, racist as it seemed to be in the implications posed by their critics, took active part in the shaping of her reception. Such practices reflect promotional strategies that

²⁶¹ "The Black Swan—And So Forth," *Liberator*, Vol. 24, No. 45, November 10, 1854, 180.

embody the ways in which early ideologies of branding sought to position the diva culturally and rhetorically within the terms of cultural uplift. While evidence exists that Greenfield's performances were more than occasionally figured in minstrel terms – one story exists of ushers who seemed loathe to even approach her on stage – Greenfield's career also illustrates her facility in managing public opinions with these regional presses. In advance of her departure to Europe, Greenfield would send a letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1853, noting her apologies that people of color were barred from attending the concert at Metropolitan Hall, stating that it was “expressly stated in the agreement for the use of the hall” that no one of color would be allowed. Positioning herself in terms of charity, Greenfield expressed:

I will with pleasure sing for the benefit of any charity that will elevate the condition of my coloured brethren, as soon as the necessary arrangements shall be completed for the same, which must necessarily be arranged for an early day, as I shall take my departure for Europe on the 6th proximo.²⁶²

Evasive or sincere, Greenfield's letter illustrates early ways in which the management of this public played out in the extant presses of the day.

Moreover, this labor over her image would also be extended to the development of a biographical sketch of her life entitled *The Black Swan At Home and Abroad; Or, a Biographical Sketch* (1855). Within this text, clear strategies of mythologization of Greenfield occurred, tracing her rise to the stage from her roots as a slave until she acquired her freedom from her mistress who had become a Quaker in the Society of Friends. Within this tale, Greenfield's talents are narrativized as a process of almost scientific discovery, having occurred by the observation of “a

²⁶² Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 7, 1853.

physician, humane and courteous; capable, too, of distinguishing and appreciating merit and genius, under whatever prejudices and disadvantages they were presented.”²⁶³ Within this context, her vocal talents and opportunities are positioned in terms of white racial encouragement, after having a teacher by the name of Miss Price invite her to her home where she accompanied Greenfield on a guitar. In this way, one can observe competing claims about the signification of racial uplift posed by Greenfield’s performing body, whether in terms of early African American hopes about the self-definition of Black performers or the largesse of a white aristocracy’s musical support for a Black vocalist. From there, the biography describes the scene of the Black diva’s discovery in racially embodied terms:

Her pulses quickened as she stood and watched the fair Anglo-Saxon fingers of her young patroness run over the key board of a full-toned piano-forte, eliciting the sweet, sad, sacred, solemn sounds. Emotion well nigh overcame her; but the gentle encouragement of her fair young friend dissipated her fears and increased her confidence. She sung [*sic*]; and before she had finished she was surrounded by the astonished inmates of the house, who, attracted by the remarkable compass and sweetness of her voice, stealthily entered the room, and now, unperceived, stood gathered behind her. The applause which followed the first trial before this small, but intelligent audience, gratified as much as it embarrassed her, from unexpected and sudden surprise. She not only received an invitation to repeat her visit, but Miss P., for a reasonable compensation, undertook her instruction in the first rudiments of music. The progress of genius is not like that of common minds. It is needless to say that her improvement was very rapid.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ *The Black Swan At Home and Abroad; Or, a Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the American Vocalist*, (Philadelphia, PA: WM. S. Young Printer, 1855), 4.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

Within this account, Greenfield's biography demonstrates several tropes that would feature in later publicity and practices of branding employed in selling Black singing artists to the American public. Such features can be typified around the discovery of raw natural gifts and the overcoming of the class conditions of a racial caste system in the United States, among other features. Also, curiously, despite Greenfield's training, the biographic sketch also positions tickets for the performer's career within existing fault lines in her public reception. As a number of critics had demonstrated racial bias in the perception of Greenfield's undisciplined voice, her biographic sketch positioned this lack of education as part of a need to support her performances: "Greenfield is on the verge of excellence, and it remains for the public to decide whether she shall have the means to pursue her studies."²⁶⁵ This biographic sketch, including extensive reviews of her performance career as well as concert bills, reflects, perhaps, the efforts that Greenfield and her team employed in the construction of her star image as a former slave within the context of the Antebellum U.S., showing clear ways in which the Black operatic diva employed strategies of containment and exploitation of racial attitudes in her navigation of the American stage. As the sonic color line informed white racial attitudes about European and therefore white supremacy in the arts, these discourses, left undisrupted, also provided fertile ground for disciplining support for Greenfield's career as an opportunity for white economic and cultural largesse. Live performance, as is often neglected, reflects another node of consumption, as can be observed in abolitionist critiques of the cost of Greenfield's performances as prohibitive for people of color. While such considerations of this performance history reflect the frustrating and unequal terms of mid-nineteenth century U.S. society—a period in which resistance to the structures of white supremacy itself could pose consequences of racial violence or a prohibition from the operatic

²⁶⁵*The Black Swan At Home and Abroad*, 6.

venues of Greenfield's art—the Black diva responded, ambivalent as it may be, by exploiting the resonances of this racial presence by disciplining the discursive construction of her voice and appropriating discourses of cultural uplift with a uniquely racial lens. Within this context, it is no wonder that Greenfield's persona as the “Black Swan” would serve as a fitting embodiment of the cultural politics of racial uplift that would undergird debates about Black musical production in the development of the 1920s record industry.

Black Swan, Black Womanhood, and the Activist Diva Commodity:

Just as the Black diva had augured new imaginations about the Black performing subject within the context of opera, her emergence in its more modern context would be within the development of phonograph brands that promised racial progress in the form of a music commodity. Importantly, Black commercial recording artists, as Tim Brooks notes, had long been featured within the record industry, as George W. Johnson, a street musician, would produce two of the biggest selling records of the 1890s.²⁶⁶ Typical casting of Black talent in the phonograph industry had been drawn from vaudeville and tent-shows, while other figures like Bert Williams would enter into prestigious, though often demeaning, contracts with Victor Records. Significant aspects of this history, including key performers, are covered by Tim Brooks who employs a method of music historiography to recapture what he terms the “lost sounds” of African American musicians who worked in this recording industry, lost precisely because such history has not been adequately preserved or examined. Moreover, Brooks's critical work parallels, perhaps, some of the very mechanisms of how ideologies of serious music and listening have worked to exert structural forces in the study of music history. Widely acknowledged, in spite of such critical

²⁶⁶ Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2004), 5.

absences, is the recognition that popular music culture owes much of its roots in the perceptions, fantasies, and melodies that had dominated the structural boundaries of 'black' sound. When such music became translated into recording industry, this commodity of blackness, hewn from folk, religious, and minstrel sound traditions, was foundational to the history of the emergence of an American music industry and system of mass entertainment. As is often noted, it is quite difficult to create musical boundaries that sustain essentialized notions of racial ownership of sound traditions in the United States, particularly when understanding that the origination of some music genres considered authentically Black are derived, in part, through the imitative stylings of blackface minstrelsy popularized by Thomas D. Rice and his appropriative fantasies of racial performance. At the same time, while the evolution of sound does not always support racial claims of cultural ownership of a specific musical tradition, this statement must stand apart from the recognition that the concept of music industry and its development of sound commodities, in fact, authenticates, on a very clear level, the perception that there are, indeed, elements of racial ownership of culture. The ownership of one's art is a significant dynamic for many artists working in music industry. Within this vantage, African Americans and industry organizers would contest white racial control over cultural industry throughout much of the record industry's history with high points in the formation of Black Swan Records, Motown Records, and Jay-Z's Tidal streaming service. Within this struggle, the Black diva, from Ethel Waters to Diana Ross to Beyoncé, represents a significant site of cultural as well as political and economic aspirations to Black self-determination over cultural production in the United States.

The formation of a music industry tailored for selling Black sound and related commodities of Black performance to African American communities reflected aspects of cultural activism by the Black press in the 1910s. In 1916, *The Chicago Defender* published a call for market research

about the number of Black Victrola owners: “The record companies are seeking to find out how many victrolas are owned by members of the Race. When this is known, then records of the Race’s great artists will be placed on the market.”²⁶⁷ Months later, a column would be published that read as a kind of media activism about the push for more Black artists to appear within the company’s catalogues: “An appeal should be sent to the Victor Record company asking that these noted artists be heard, giving reasons that it would be a paying proposition to have them as well as the above numbers. The address of the Victor people is either New York or Chicago. Do it now.”²⁶⁸ This push, for the ability to purchase Black artists, represented a form of consumer activism that viewed the release of records by great Black artists as a means of achieving racial equality. When James Reese Europe and his orchestra had been engaged by Victor Records to make a dance record, *The Chicago Defender* would write: “Such a recognition proves conclusively that for talent and ability members of the Afro-American race stand as high as any other race.”²⁶⁹ Starting as early as 1918, Victor Records had started commercial outreach to Black communities through *The Chicago Defender* in particular. What began as general-written copy in these first ads, they would develop into full-page ads by 1923, proclaiming the works of Noble Sissle, Lena Wilson, and vaudeville stars Arthur Moss and Edward Frye. Advertising a special list of blues records, their spread would read:

These are popular hits sung by popular coloured artists who have won fame and recognition for themselves as musical entertainers. There is side-splitting comedy, dance music that

²⁶⁷ Editor, “Victor Records Made by Race Artists in Sight,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 21, 1916, 5.

²⁶⁸ “Demands Records of Our Artists,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1916, 4.

²⁶⁹ “Perpetuate Europe Music in Victor Records,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1914, 6.

won't let your feet keep still, and entertainment galore in this special list. You'll want one of every record in it.²⁷⁰

Such advertisements illustrate the growing ways in which Black consumption of phonograph records was hailed as a form of racial recognition and activism by commercial media industry.

By the end of the decade, the development of a market for “black music” had developed specific forms of rhetoric in its commercial address. While market categories for this music proliferated to include, with various definitions, dance, jazz, and blues, the music was sold through ideologies of Black excellence and Black ‘authenticity,’ the latter term marking out an in-group identification between the musician and a perceived Black readership in publications like *The Chicago Defender*, *Afro-American*, or *The New York Amsterdam News*. In selling Jim Jackson’s blues records, one ad proclaimed, “everybody says he’s one of the best blues singers in the world,” while also remarking about the series of records in the Victor catalogue, “Fact is, every record on this list is a “natural” . . . the kind of stuff you and your friends like. It’s the greatest collection of red-hot number ever gotten out.”²⁷¹ Another ad seemed to call upon ideas of Black economic struggle, suggesting that one man’s desire to go to the ball was compromised due to “his big toe sticking out of his one sock, and blisters on the other foot?” while proposing the remedy of a Victor record to enjoy in the privacy of his home.²⁷² When Victor Records expanded its selection of Black artist recordings in 1925, it was reported in *The Pittsburgh Courier*: “Several Real Race Records Released by Uptown Store: Victor, For First Time In Many Years, Produces Six Double Discs of Real Syncopation.”²⁷³ One ad from Vocalion Records coupled this idea of Black exceptionalism

²⁷⁰ “New Victor Records,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1923, 3.

²⁷¹ “The Policy Blues,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 18, 1928, 2.

²⁷² “One Sock Blues,” *Afro-American*, July 21, 1928, 5.

²⁷³ “Several Real Race Records Released by Uptown Store,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 23, 1925, 3.

with the image of the Black performer as one of unparalleled expression and therefore authenticity: “Leroy Carr: In his moanful way sings as nobody else can sing.”²⁷⁴ As was the case with Greenfield, such reviews frequently recognized the histories of blackness that undergirded and were embodied in Black vocal performance, attesting to Eidsheim’s very claim about the concept of ‘sonic blackness’ in which embodiments of race impact the perceptual qualities of sound.

Within this context, developments in the phonograph industry of the 1920s would work to take up the historical influences of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield by an appeal to her operatic authority as a model of Black self-determination. W.E.B. Du Bois would greet the arrival of a new record company whose name directly drew on this Black diva’s legacy in the formation of Black Swan Records. Writing in the NAACP’s publication *The Crisis*, Du Bois would recount Greenfield’s roots from Mississippi until the development of her voice’s training later in her youth. Uniquely, her figure of Black diva-ness appeared representative, for Du Bois, of Black excellence against white standards of vocal quality, writing “The Black Swan was often compared with Jenny Lind and had it not been for her race, she might easily have been known as one of the greatest singers of her day.”²⁷⁵ This figuration of Greenfield, crucially, reflected Du Bois’s blessing for the development of Black Swan Records, a company that promised to produce records of “the voices of great colored singers of the present time.”²⁷⁶ Founded by Harry H. Pace in 1921, the record company would operate as a black-owned production company before its acquisition in 1924 by Paramount Records. Advertised music by the company included emphases on classical music and opera while their commercial catalogues included, but emphasized less, offerings in spirituals, ragtime, and blues. As David Suisman writes about the business, “at stake was not merely

²⁷⁴ “Wrong Man Blues,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 23, 1929, A3.

²⁷⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Black Swan,” *Crisis*, March 1921, 213.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

entertainment but access to, and control of, material resources that could cultivate and boost African Americans' creative spirits, support and encourage African American business development and economic self-sufficiency."²⁷⁷ Suisman's analysis reflects the reality that music's function as a commodity is crucially important for understanding cultural and economic power in terms of who produces culture and who owns it. Yet more than this, the development of Black Swan's record business would forcefully articulate activist models of cultural consumption that posited the capacity of African Americans to assert their own self-definition through patronage of Black business in the marketplace. This activist commodity form, particularly as it would martial conceptions of the Black diva, points to one central point of the diva commodity's history in which the activity of cultural consumption would be imbued with distinctly anti-racist resonance.

As well, I turn to the development of "race records" within the context of the early 1920s to look at the networks of signification that transformed the public construction of the diva as a racial subject. This emphasis hopes to recover the process of how Black sound, studied earlier through its tensions between sonic and physical embodiments in 19th-century musical criticism, became re-mediated within the context of this performance tradition's emergence in the phonograph industry. While Stoever introduced the concept of the sonic color line to map out how racial arrangements are coded through the listening ear and extended through sound technologies, I would argue that this notion of a sonic color line needs more forceful examination of the construction of these boundaries through commercial industry. While Stoever's analysis rests on the assumption that sound and listening practices are themselves deeply racialized, perhaps, it is important to understand that the racial hierarchies supported by such discourses of music are not always rooted in constructions of sound alone. Examining the historical construction of music

²⁷⁷ David Suisman, "Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (March 2004): 1295.

genres, Karl Hagstrom Miller details that the marketing of race records was unusually expansive featuring everything from religious speeches, vaudevillian blues, to show tunes or performances of southern music traditions by Black performers.²⁷⁸ Whereas race records sometimes featured genre displays that broke up an imagined class address of music sound, its organization, as its title implies, was situated around the arrangement of Black bodies into commercial catalogues. In contrast, the white southern crooner, sharing some of the same folk music traditions as African Americans, would be sold through Old-Time music genres. Later in the century, these markers of sound through genre would retain strong senses of their rigidity, particularly as rock music, in particular, translated the South's racially mixed sounds into the performance and genre trend of the white male rocker and rock group, a style of music performance that marketers of rock music like *American Bandstand* and MTV would initially enforce in the development of music programming through their pioneering of national youth culture.

Situated within new heights of prosperity for the recording industry, Black Swan's founder Harry H. Pace would deliver a speech entitled "Public Opinion and the Negro," where he distinguished between two types of public opinion:

One is to think of it as it already exists, to deplore it if it happens to be unfavorable, to watch it run its course, and to take the consequences if it does not react favorably to you. The other way is the present day idea which we as a people are just beginning to learn, and that is to anticipate Public Opinion and to help mould it and shape it so as to be sure that it does react the way we want.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Hagstrom-Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 187.

²⁷⁹ Harry H. Pace, "Public Opinion and the Negro," typescript, June 29, 1921, pp. 1-2, 9, box 5, series B, group 1, Papers of the NAACP (microfilm, 1,428 reels, University Publications of America, 1982-), series B, group 1, reel 8, pp. 1-2, 10. Quoted in Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 215.

By this comment, Pace appeared to position a notion of cultural propaganda, in its older sense of ‘propagating’ information, within an activist sense to think of how public opinion management could be one way to curb the spread of violence against African Americans within the context of the Ku Klux Klan’s re-awakening in the late 1910s and 1920s. If the Klan’s racial activism could be traced to D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), Pace’s later interest in black-owned music production as part of a broader fight to change public opinion of African Americans reflects the salience of culture as foundational to broader political projects. Against this context, Pace would appeal to the political senses of cultural representation as a site of activism, stating:

We have come to the point now where, unless we take hold vigorously of this matter of creating and shaping Public Opinion itself, all other efforts we may put forth in any line will be useless so far as our status among the races of the world is concerned.²⁸⁰

Pace’s ideas themselves were not new, particularly as earlier themes of public opinion as a form of producing racial uplift had informed a number of earlier Black intellectuals. Of them, activist Fannie Barrier Williams had seized on this concept of “public opinion” to refer to the social attitudes of the (white) American public towards members of Black communities. Lamenting the difficult task of shifting public opinion to gain more equitable treatment for the race, Williams would write in the *Voice of the Negro*, that “men and women of like courage and like insistence are needed today we must look to ourselves and not to the white race.”²⁸¹ In a period of time in which white public sentiment had seemed to grow tired politically of debates about notions of racial justice within the context of post-Reconstruction America, this activism needed grassroots African American support to throw off traditional notions of blackness as inferior to “become

²⁸⁰ Pace, "Public Opinion and the Negro," pp. 1-2, 10.

²⁸¹ Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Negro and Public Opinion," *Voice of the Negro*, January 1904, 32.

stronger in the virtue of patience, more efficient in good works, more deserving in our achievements, and more intelligent and co-operative in our contention for rights.”²⁸² In many senses, Black Swan Records’ forum for Black cultural genius and creative expression posed great promise of political organizing through the medium of the phonograph. Reflecting this point, Lerone A. Martin has written that the development of race records had not only contributed to the growth of the record industry in the 1920s but that its advent had constituted a new centralization of African American community.²⁸³ Challenging, in some senses, the cultural hegemony of the church, Martin writes “the nascent Black leisure market became a space where ideals of race progress, politics, citizenship, and propriety were contested.”²⁸⁴ Among various church responses, as Martin notes, were the development of entertainment that could compete with working class consumption of these records; while other responses rejected this idea of cultural programming but still believed the need to counter the cultural influence of race records to preserve racial and religious progress.²⁸⁵ With the foundation of Black Swan Records, the development of a middle-class address towards African American consumers had worked to inscribe these very notions of progress within the very branding of the cultural commodity itself. In this way, the development of the Black diva as a commodity embodies a deep recognition of historical attempts by Black artists to claim self-ownership over racial representation found in cultural production. Thus, the Black diva’s re-emergence in the mid-century U.S. would reflect these phonographic origins as an activist commodity branded and advertised through notions of racial uplift.

²⁸² Williams, "The Negro and Public Opinion," *Voice of the Negro*, 32.

²⁸³ Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 32.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 33

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*.

While Okeh Records had previously advertised its “quality” popular and dance music, the company’s public profile would center advertising for “race records” upon the release of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” (1920). Smith had recorded previous songs for the company as “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” and “That Thing Called Love” after Perry Bradford persuaded Fred Hagar to develop music for an African American audience. By October 1920, Mamie Smith’s popularity had earned her likeness’ critical placement in



Figure 5: “Okeh Records – To Hear is To Buy” Advertisement

Okeh’s advertisements in *Talking Machine World*. Decidedly, the sexual aspects of Smith’s image would be underscored by showing off her naked collar bone in profile (fig. 5), as the advertisement mixed associations of sound, food, and sexuality in declaring “The music of so new a flavor.”²⁸⁶ Mixing exoticism with Black female sexuality, the advertisement’s placement also challenges traditional readings that the music itself was largely marketed to African American audiences only, particularly when considering how these advertisements drew upon minstrel tropes in their addressing of potential record dealers. These advertisements for blues artists, as Mark Dolan notes, drew on familiar figures as the mammy, sapphire, and the jezebel.²⁸⁷ Patricia Hill Collins refers to these stereotypes as “controlling images” to reflect how their structuring of perceptions around Black female sexuality were fundamental to cultural and legal structures of Black political oppression. These controlling images, as can be seen, were also vital as commodified

²⁸⁶ “Okeh Records,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 16, No. 10 (1920), 67.

²⁸⁷ Mark K. Dolan, “Extra! *Chicago Defender* Race Records Ads Show South from Afar,” *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Fall 2007): 113.

representations of Black womanhood through cultural industry, too.²⁸⁸ In November 1920, the follow-up to Mamie Smith’s branding and appearance for Okeh would feature a racial caricature of “Mr. Public Opinion,” who embodied the stock character of “Zip Coon” in its minstrel figuration of free and later urban African Americans as fanciful and pretentious. Embodying racist attitudes about an inherent uneducated-ness of Black people, this Mr. Public Opinion reports on Mamie Smith’s voice in ad copy that displays a racial dialect informed by such minstrel performance (fig.



Figure 6: “Mr. Public Opinion” Advertisement

6): "I's heard Blues, but I's telling you Mamie's beats 'em all. ... her voice is as sweet as honey! It jes flows and flows and ev'ry note gets richer and richer until I can just sit back and expire with joy."²⁸⁹ While Smith would center Okeh’s advertising in *Talking Machine World* during this period, she was sometimes situated in explicitly patriotic terms of a buying national public,

embodying what some might call a kind of commercial nationalism: “It’s Mamie Smith’s blues songs that are creating an un-heard-of demand. The desire of a nation backs them. Give them the best blues songs ever recorded.”²⁹⁰ In this way, the advertising of Smith’s celebrity towards dealers, perhaps, underscores the challenges that were initially considered in how Black culture would fare in the marketplace. Smith’s value for Okeh was ambivalent in some senses. These advertisements drew upon negative perceptions of African Americans, going so far as to satirize a Black activist consciousness in targeting the concept of

²⁸⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY and London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 69-97. Vol. 16, No. 11 (1920), okeh record

²⁸⁹ “Okeh Records,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (1920), 19.

²⁹⁰ “Mamie Smith Exclusive,” *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (1920), 136.

public opinion to market the Black diva commodity as a national good. Against this painful recognition was the clear indication of Smith's worth for the label. As Okeh Records announced a sale on its other artists in February 1921, they maintained the mark-up on Mamie Smith's records for \$1 compared to the sale price of eighty-five cents.²⁹¹ While these considerations are not co-equal in terms of Black female dignity, they *do* suggest the tensions at work in Smith's value as a commodity for Okeh.

And indeed, the longer Mamie Smith's career continued, *Talking Machine World* worked to position Smith in terms of racial exceptionalism. In another advertisement, Smith was framed as a singular talent. The ad-copy stated, "Because she has developed an individual manner of singing Blues, she stands apart and above other Blues interpreters." The racial dimensions of the statement were obvious, seeming to draw on the same language of racial uplift as African American cultural thought that had stressed racial excellence, what Du Bois might refer to elsewhere as the "Talented Tenth," as a means of positioning Smith. Moreover, almost a century before such Black divas as Beyoncé or Aretha would feature a rhetoric of "queen" in their fan outreach, Smith's advertisements would refer to her as the "Queen of Syncopated Harmonies." In this way, Black exceptionalism drew on a kind of royal language, perhaps, in ways that positioned Smith in terms of the power and civilization rhetoric that had dominated discussions of previous Black performers as observed in the development of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's opera career.²⁹²

Seeming to comment on the popularization of Okeh Records, W.E.B. Du Bois would denounce the phonograph industry's neglect of Black communities, writing:

²⁹¹ "Okeh Record Prices Reduced," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1921), 125.

²⁹² "Mamie Smith The Records Most in Demand," *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1921), 34.

We must now develop a business organization to preserve and record our best voices; we ought to have records of Burleigh, Hayes, Talbert, Anderson, Johnson, Harrison, Hagan, Dett, Diton and a dozen others to reveal the best music, not only of their own race but of all races and ages.²⁹³

Articulating a kind of Black individualism associated with musicianship, Du Bois's comment reflected his appreciation of Black vocal talent as representing embodiments of the best talent of the race. Within this context, Du Bois, here, would forward a notion of racial representation, critiquing the insult of recording industries to have initially denied Black artists on their rosters before their popularization through blues music following Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues." Critiquing the development of race records, he directs his consternation towards the development of the label for providing great singers like Roland Hayes only opportunities to do "comic darky songs," rather than his signature work as a concert artist, reflecting how perceptions of these race records functioned for Du Bois and his activist audience as hearkening back to traditions of racial minstrelsy.²⁹⁴

Embodiments of this reality are further observable in the Black press, particularly through advertisements by Okeh Records that martialled minstrel drawings in their outreach to an African American audience. For example, their advertisements frequently recalled the imagery of minstrel shows. To advertise "Lonesome Mamma Blues," Okeh Records would include a picture of a crying mammy caricature, while advertisements for "Muscle Shoals Blues" featured a Black man in a violently shaking jalopy driving towards birds for sport. Yet in contrast, these minstrel caricatures seemed to recreate the situation of minstrel performance to exert a level of Black female celebrity

²⁹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Phonograph Records," *The Crisis*, February 1921, 152. Quoted in Suisman, 1305.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

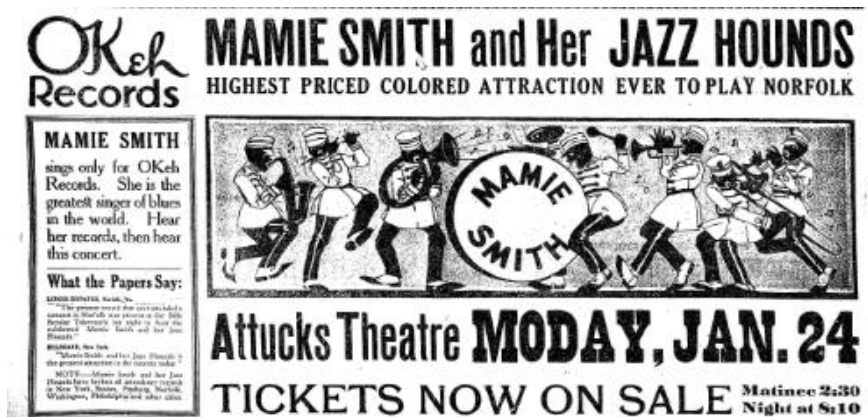


Figure 7: “Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds” Advertisement

as distinct and desirable in comparison. While Smith had typically featured in advertisements in the Black press through her photographic likeness, her accompanying “jazz

hounds” were depicted through such minstrel caricatures, suggesting at a certain level the way that Okeh used the visual style of minstrel caricatures in the gendering of musical advertising. Whereas the large company of the minstrel show was supposed to, in some senses, secure the locational setting of the plantation in the Antebellum south, this figuration was often contrasted with images of Black women who embodied a kind of sexualized respectability. An advertisement in the *New Journal and Guide*, published in Norfolk, VA, illustrates this dynamic where the musical stylings of her band members, perhaps a visual reference to Tuskegee University’s founding of a campus band in 1890, resembled racial caricatures in service of advertising Smith’s name (fig. 7).²⁹⁵ Where Mamie Smith did appear as a drawn character, the animation style featured markedly less pronounced usage of minstrel characterization in its drawings. In this “Oh Mamie!” advertisement, this characterization of Mamie as a sex symbol continues over, while her accompanying band’s dancing can be seen as more ambivalently drawing forth allusions to racial stereotypes (fig. 8).²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ “Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds,” *New Journal and Guide*, January, 22, 1921, 8.

²⁹⁶ “Oh Mamie!” *The Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1922, 6.

Against the figure of Mamie Smith, Black Swan Records would also set out to introduce its own version of the blues diva by marketing its representation of Black womanhood. As many have noted, the significance of race records reflected a marketing strategy of phonographs to Black communities directly, a process that centered around new audience addresses to a Black audience and a



**"OH MAMIE!"
"I've Got the Mamie Smith
Blues"**

Figure 8: "Oh Mamie! I've Got the Mamie Smith Blues" Advertisement

related cultivation of a Black celebrity system. Claims about racial authenticity are crucial for understanding the assumptions and ideological projects that were rendered through phonograph branding and advertising in the contestation over a market for Black sound. In the company's announcement, Harry Pace gave an interview to *The Chicago Defender*, where he positioned the company's cultural production in terms of ideologies of cultural representation, racial uplift, and meritocracy:

There are over twelve million Colored people in the United States, and in that number there is hid away a wonderful amount of musical ability. The Race is naturally musical, but it has never been given a fair chance. ... We want you to examine these records; note their fine appearance and quality. You will see that you will have no occasion to apologize for their appearance. You will note the clean, clear-cut, distinct recording, and you will have no occasion to apologize for the voices or the recording. Our people of the United States

are at the point where they will buy any article manufactured by us provided it has merit and quality. Black Swan records have both.²⁹⁷

Striking in Pace's appropriation of the language of hygiene in advertising, this rhetoric, perhaps, illustrates how Black Swan appealed directly to older traditions of the 19th-century and its emphasis on ideologies of quality music and cultural progress. Crucially, this language of "merit" and "quality" in Black Swan performers worked to intervene in racist ideologies of Black primitivism that had contested the reception of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's performing body. These framing ideologies of the Black female body *as commodity* would play out in Black Swan's distinguishing of its own blues queen against Mamie Smith. Reflected in Black Swan's cultivated use of an understanding of racial authenticity in its advertising, E. Patrick Johnson, writing about the ways in which cultural groups have appropriated the language of race for various political and cultural projects, complicates traditional ways in which the language of an authentic blackness, signaled so often as an inherently political identity, has worked to both exclude queer of color subjects from a Black identity and positioned this authenticity against disparaging stereotypes of blackness found in minstrel performance. Johnson observes, "because the concept of blackness has no essence, "black authenticity" is overdetermined—contingent on the historical, social and political terms of its production. Authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital."²⁹⁸ These marks of exclusion would largely work to cultivate a specific image of Black womanhood associated with cultivation and class for Black Swan, while rejecting certain musical stylings of country and blues music as too provincial for the company's urbane image.

²⁹⁷ "Black Swan Records: New Corporation Announces First List of Production – Fills Long Felt Want," *The Chicago Defender*, May 7, 1921, 8.

²⁹⁸ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

Embodying this contrast, images of Ethel Waters often evinced the construction of Black female respectability that had been the target of Pace’s record company. Hailed as the “World’s

**• A New
Black Swan
Record by
Ethel Waters**



Figure 9: “A New Black Swan Record by Ethel Waters” Advertisement

Greatest Blues Singer,” the standard image of Waters in advertisements featured her in a bonnet, modeling a visage with eyes seemingly turned towards god (fig. 9).²⁹⁹ Whereas Mamie Smith’s entourage had been advertised as “jazz hounds,” Waters’s advertising language did not take up such associations between blackness and animality. Additionally, Waters’s placement in touring programs would also juxtapose her celebrity body in terms of racial progress, appearing with figures like Jack Johnson, the famous boxer who would take the heavyweight title against “Great White Hope” Jim Jeffries in 1910. Such advertising for events directly appealed to the signification of the Black body, whether in music or sport, as a powerful assertion of racial progress.³⁰⁰ Waters had been so central to Black Swan Records, in fact, that a renewal of

her contract had included, as it was reported in *The Chicago Defender*, a proviso that Waters could not marry within a year in exchange for terms that made her “the highest salaried Colored phonograph star in the country” while displacing scrutiny of her queerness.³⁰¹ In profiles of Waters in the press, her publicity would often associate her performing body with technical methods of precision, thereby undermining histories of critiques that associated Black sound with primitivism—similar to the ones that found Greenfield’s trained voice uncultivated. In an *Afro-American* profile in 1922, the reviewer described Waters: “Although, always using extreme

²⁹⁹ “A New Black Swan Record by Ethel Waters,” *Afro-American*, November 4, 1921, 8.

³⁰⁰ “Gala Holiday Bill,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 19, 1921, 3.

³⁰¹ “Ethel Must Not Marry: Signs Contract for Big Salary Providing She Does Not Marry Within a Year,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 24, 1921, 7.

judgment in her methods of projection, avoiding the boisterous method used by some “blues” singers, her voice has now mellowed into that perfection that is the stamp of true artistry and lifts her to the topmost place of this class of singers.” Adding afterwards about her performance at the Douglass Theatre, “The projection of her songs is accompanied by just enough “action” to add the right touch of impressiveness, her sense of rhythm and balance being perfect. In a word, she has now reached the stage of perfection only attained by the true artist.”³⁰² Crucially, while advertising for Mamie Smith had embodied the idea of Black vocalists as being associated with their body, Waters’s descriptions frequently reversed these characterizations by casting her as disciplined in her use of this body through generous mentions of her vocal techniques. Noting this comparative sentiment, later press releases written up in the Black press would refer to Waters as the “queen of blues singers.”³⁰³ In this way, the construction of Waters in the press not only represented a recognition of her status as a Black artist but the specific claims to quality in which Black Swan’s project of racial uplift was rooted required that Waters achieve distinction *against* and *in terms of* her race, a point that had been echoed in Pace’s cultivation of racial authenticity for Black Swan’s brand vision. This positioning of Waters as a cultivated embodiment of Black womanhood appealed to a brand formulation that appropriated notions of social hygiene (with its distinct racial, class, and religious resonances) and racial progress that had been observable earlier in the century through the record industry’s project of cultural uplift through opera.

As Lawrence Schenbeck notes, “the moral idealization of women, and their association with “sensitivity,” including the arts, was already well-established in the dominant society and would be echoed by the black elites.”³⁰⁴ Crucially, Black Swan Records took up ideologies of the

³⁰² “Douglass (Ethel Waters),” *Afro-American*, June 16, 1922, 4.

³⁰³ ““Black Swan” Artists,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 8, 1922, 7.

³⁰⁴ Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Lawrence, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 9.

“New Negro,” i.e. the call for a reclaimed social dignity of Black cultural identities against the legal conditions of Jim Crow America, through its cultivation of female stars within these traditions. Nearly contemporaneous to these phonograph ads, Elise Johnson McDougald, writing in “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” would appeal to discourses of acculturation and civilization in her ennobling of Black womanhood who, in Harlem, “is free from the cruder handicaps of primitive household hardships and the grosser forms of sex and race subjugation.”³⁰⁵ Within this account, McDougald would directly summon up Black women’s search for desirability through beauty. Where traditional discourses of femininity had denied Black women the respectability of womanhood, McDougald locates this critique in the ways that such cultural symbols as Aunt Jemima cast a shadow over Black female subjectivity, writing “She is most often used to prove the mirthless laugh of ridicule.... To a race naturally sunny comes the twilight of self-doubt and a sense of personal inferiority.”³⁰⁶ Moreover, McDougald would recognize the traditional rejection of Black cultural representation politics as being too located within the realm of the mental and spiritual. Her remarks reflect the ways that the New Negro movement emphasized the recognition of the need to reclaim a sense of Black pride itself. To this point, these racial and gendered distinctions drew influence from older ideologies of white womanhood, such as sexual respectability, to inform the construction of Ethel Waters as a brand image for Black Swan. Moreover, the author’s larger arguments would place value on the courage of Black women to stand tall against the contemptuous attitudes of those around her. In doing so, this Black woman, for McDougald, may hope to maintain her beauty, charm, and the improvement of her mind. Such possibilities reflect her service to “the needs of her family, community, and race.”³⁰⁷ Concluding

³⁰⁵ Elise Johnson McDougald, “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York, NY: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 369.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 370.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 382.

this framing is McDougald's figure of Black womanhood as a promise of "the wind of the race's destiny stirs more briskly because of her striving."³⁰⁸ Within this context, the ideology of Black women's participation in cultural activities often reflected the aim of combatting negative representations of Black womanhood, thus illustrating how new ideologies of cultural representation and consumption fit within larger political projects that followed after the ending of chattel slavery in the United States.³⁰⁹

Within the emergence of the New Negro intellectual and cultural tradition, one strain of historiography worked to place this new figuration of blackness within firmer traditions of nationalist thought. In writing on "The Colored Woman of To-Day," women's rights advocate Fannie Barrier Williams would dramatize this narrative of racial uplift by describing a generation of Black women who "seem to have no relationship to the slavery conditions of the yesterday of history." The reason for this transformation, she contends, is that they have "been completely lifted out of the past by the Americanism which transforms and moulds into higher forms all who come under the spell of American free institutions."³¹⁰ In this way, Williams draws on a tradition of historically situated personhood constructed around the notion of progress, observable in some formulations in the entrepreneurial form of Edison but would be later applied to the constructions of celebrity that would mark the development of the Black record industry and its advertising address to African American and white audiences alike. Williams, drawing upon this tradition, writes of contemporary Black women's "spirit and progressiveness" but situates this notion of progress within a specifically racial framing: "representative of a large class of women who are a beautiful fulfillment of the prophecy that out of social disorders of a bonded race there shall

³⁰⁸ McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," 382.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Coloured Woman of To-Day," *Godey's Magazine*, July 1897, 29.

arise a womanhood strong, spirited, and chaste in all the things that make for social uplifting and refinement.”³¹¹ Elsewhere, Williams had characterized this uplifting and refinement of Black womanhood in explicitly national terms, asserting the vision of full citizenship and belonging owed by democratic notions of Americanism, writing:

...the standard of life in the aggregate amongst us is not high; it is our blessed privilege to elevate it. There are precious interests close to us that have too long been neglected and it is our golden opportunity to make these interests important. Thus shall we have a conscious share in whatever is true, beautiful and good in the destiny of this republic.³¹²

Moreover, Black Swan’s desire to reform the idea of Black representation often reflected in the types of Black female artists who would be greeted into their recording studios. Their search for musical talent was largely directed towards images of Black respectability and sophistication. In *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability*, E. Francis White illustrates the role of a “politics of respectability” in how subaltern groups have connected personal behavior with practices of resistance. These practices typically frame the social values of subaltern groups through a display of their social values as compatible with dominant in-groups.³¹³ This form of politics has been attached to a constricted ability for Black women to express themselves sexually, since adopters of respectability sought to define themselves in opposition to damaging stereotypes. Aspects of colorism, indeed, here would be observable, particularly as darker singers were rejected by the label when compared to the talent Black Swan often pursued. In some senses, colorism reflected, perhaps, constructions of taste and sophistication that often related to the racial

³¹¹ Williams, “The Coloured Woman of To-Day,” *Godney’s Magazine*, 31.

³¹² Fannie Barrier Williams, “The Awakening of Women,” *A.M.E. Church Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (April 1897): 398.

³¹³ E. Francis White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 26.

hierarchies of the period, particularly as such practices of racial uplift worked to assert Black contributions to society and civilization, a discourse always already troubled within the conditions of social and political power of the early 20th-century. Whether it be the cultural ownership of ‘authentically’ Black sound genres by largely white companies or deeply colonized constructions of artistic value, these issues would structure inherent forms of classism to the musical project that was Black Swan. As Suisman notes, Harry Pace’s record company accepted blues music, in particular, so long as it did not present an alternative image of blackness than the one cultivated through its project of racial uplift. Supporting this observation is the oft-noted rejection of Bessie Smith by the company and the later pursuit of Ethel Waters, likely due to perceptions of the former’s coarse sound not fitting within its brand project.³¹⁴³¹⁵ Important to note in observing these class tensions, as Lawrence Schenbeck does, is the ways that racial uplift ideology represented, perhaps, not a liberationist approach to Black movement but a strategy of survival within a dominant culture’s investment in social hierarchies through racialized theories of western progress and culture.³¹⁶

The Black diva, contested within the 19th-century, became a marker in Black Swan Records of a distinct class of Black talent that rooted a notion of popularity in racial distinction with distinctly activist resonances. Drawing on this rhetoric, Black Swan Records positioned an understanding of an authentic blackness in its advertisements. Appearing in *The Chicago Defender*, Pace’s company claimed itself as “The only negro records made by the only negro company using exclusively negro voices and musicians.”³¹⁷ Such publicity illustrated how Black

³¹⁴ Suisman, “Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture,” 1310.

³¹⁵ This biographic detail, before Smith would later sign to Columbia, is also featured in the biopic about her life *Bessie* (2015), where she is played by actress-rapper Queen Latifah.

³¹⁶ Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music*, 6.

³¹⁷ “Black Swan Records,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 4, 1921, 7.

Swan demonstrated the same tactics of exclusivity and celebrity that had marked other production companies. At the same time, Black Swan would take this tactic of asserting exclusivity in highly public actions reported on in the Black press. For instance, when Columbia Records had started promoting Carroll Clark as an exclusive artist, Black Swan filed a suit that their exclusivity had been violated, also alleging that its attorneys were investigating whether rival companies had bribed record dealers to damage their products to damage the perception of the product itself.³¹⁸ As business competition began to heat up between Black Swan and its peers, its public messaging would more explicitly center racial progress, advertising “Patronize Race enterprises when you get the same value for your money.”³¹⁹ While advertisements in *The Chicago Defender* had taken fewer strides to mark out the genres of music released by Black Swan Records, advertisements in the NAACP publication *The Crisis*, in contrast, emphasized the top bill genre of “High Class,” thus appealing to attitudes of serious music within the Black intellectual tradition embodied by W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1920s. Whereas Ethel Waters had received high billing in popular Black presses, she tended to feature lower or as absent in the advertising featured in *The Crisis*, highlighting the same level of cultural and racial negotiation of blues music that had typified the label’s rejection of Bessie Smith. Representative of this trend, one ad would even leave out their best-selling blues singer entirely. At a time when Ethel Waters appeared to be the company’s dominant star, Black Swan only advertised “sacred” and “classics” genre in the March 1922 issue of *The Crisis*.

While advertisements in *The Crisis* had preferred to emphasize classical or operatic divas, this branding also demonstrated significant legacies for understanding how Black cultural

³¹⁸ “Pace Alleges Big Record Producers Would Crush,” *New Journal Guide*, Jan 7, 1922, 1.

³¹⁹ “When You Buy a Black Swan Record,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 7, 1922, 7.

consumption was shaped during the period. Elsewhere in this advertising literature, Black Swan would intimate charges of racism towards its white competitors. For instance, an advertisement in the January 1922 edition alleged that competition from Black Swan had influenced certain companies to establish:

...a Jim Crow annex to their business. They hope to rid themselves of our competition in that way and to reduce the Negro singer and musician to the same status he had before we entered the field.³²⁰

Through such rhetoric, the Pace Phonograph Corporation directly appealed to ideologies of racial uplift and Black Swan as an embodiment of that mission in the marketplace. In doing so, their advertisements are some of the first that feature a reworking of the traditions of cultural uplift that had worked to mark opera and serious music as a commodity of cultural refinement to a middle-class audience. Black Swan often did so by appealing towards a Black intellectual class in ways that fused consumption with emergent activist framings of blackness. While striations of class politics are observable in Black Swan's advertising, it would be wrong to simply reduce such rhetoric as the *origins* of classist race politics. This vision of Black representation signified by Black Swan, however, positioned consumption as an economic issue through the lens of who can produce, distribute, and own this commodity of blackness. Through this lens, the class politics complicate the image of racial activism at work in this example, while recognizing how advertising was made compatible with the intellectual tradition of racial uplift, an ideology that aimed to create local leaders in generating movement for Black communities. Reflecting on these questions of

³²⁰ "Every Time You Buy a Black Swan Record You Buy The Only Record Made By Colored People." *The Crisis*, January 1922, 137.

racial representation and media ownership, another Black Swan ad, upon Bert Williams's death, would write:

Bert Williams was an Artist... He might have been Known as a Great Tragedian had he Been Born White. But the World for a Long Time now Has Refused to Take Black Men Seriously. So the White World made Bert Williams the World's Greatest Comedian.³²¹

Further, the ad worked to associate the burden of Williams's greatness working under a white production company into brand loyalty for Black Swan: "He was under contract, made several years ago, to a White Company. Had he Lived out this Contract He would have become, as he had promised, an Exclusive Black Swan Artist."³²² Within this context, the activist commodity of Black Swan Records can be observed as having been shaped by W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* magazine to target an explicitly Black intellectual and racial activist class. One advertisement positioned the record company, perhaps, as a form of mutual aid, "Every record you buy means employment along new lines to a large number of our talented people, in addition to clerks, stenographers and others."³²³ Here, the consumption of representation, as is now routinely ignored in critiques of representational politics, is presented as a labor issue, particularly around the concept of who can trade fairly on their talent in the marketplace. Moreover, decades before Lizabeth Cohen's notion of the consumers' republic would take hold as a vision of politicized consumption best embodied in the Eisenhower era, so would it here take shape in the form of the Black activist commodity of Black Swan Records. To this point, these advertisements also asked for patrons to engage in forms of commercial activism on Black Swan's behalf, "Ask your dealer to carry all our records in stock.

³²¹ "Bert Williams," *The Crisis*, April 1922, 284.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ "Buy New Black Swan Records Every Month," *The Crisis*, May 1921, 41.

... If he does not carry them send direct to us and we will supply you. Or send us the name of a Live young man or young woman agent who will handle our records in your community.”³²⁴

While critics usually draw upon Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness” to refer to the ways that Black subjects have had to respond to the maintenance of white racial power and systems of colonial governance, less attention is placed on how this concept of double consciousness is articulated within one version of Du Bois’s theory of history:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. ... This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. ... Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the Black man’s turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the Black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde – could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause.³²⁵

In important ways, Du Bois’s recognition of the painful history of African Americans living in and through the aftermath of Reconstruction reflected the challenge of pursuing recognition of the

³²⁴ “Buy New Black Swan Records Every Month,” *The Crisis*, May 1921, 41.

³²⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

spirit and dignity of the Black underclass. Within this view, Du Bois's advocacy of African Americans to be a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture," in some senses, reflected the ways in which social and political power were enjoined in the form of culture. Charting out Black American belonging, contemporaneous anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits would imagine the integration of Black Harlem within the concept of the American community. Surveying the community there, Herskovits privileges their ability to assimilate within New York, reflecting the same kind of puritanical notions of sex in contrast to racialized stereotypes about Black sexuality.³²⁶ More than this, the author raises an early framing of the concept of Black culture and points to its resolutely American character. "What there is to-day in Harlem distinct from the white culture which surrounds it, is, as far as I am able to see, merely a remnant from the peasant days in the South," Herskovitz writes, "Of the African culture, not a trace. Even the spirituals are an expression of the emotion of the Negro playing through the typical religious patterns of white America."³²⁷ Within this argument of the distinct influences of American vocal traditions on Black culture, Herskovitz appeals to a common sense of American-ness, like "all racial and social elements in our population."³²⁸ In this way, it was through forms of cultural production and consumption that activists and scholars both imagined the racial integration of American society through shared cultural and religious practices.

Moreover, Black Swan Records also arose in a moment strongly marked by the height of racial uplift ideology's coinciding with the New Negro movement.³²⁹ Within this movement, artists typically looked to 'integrate' racialized canons of culture by mixing folkloric southern traditions into genres of "serious music" as symphony and opera. As Kevin Gaines notes, theories of racial

³²⁶ Melville J. Herskovitz, "The Negro's Americanism," in *The New Negro*, 355-56.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 359.

³²⁸ Herskovitz, "The Negro's Americanism," 360.

³²⁹ Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music*, 9.

uplift reflected, in some senses, a self-help ideology that “describes the response of educated African Americans...numbered roughly 2 percent of the Black population in the 1890s, to de jure, or legal, segregation.”³³⁰ Crucially, the mixing of these cultural practices, in some senses, reflected the ways in which culture produced—in what would culminate in the Harlem Renaissance—an imagination of racial integration, where its political conditions of possibility were formerly denied to African Americans. In this search for distinction, the claims of self-representation found strong investment in the practice of phonography as a channel for the assertion of bourgeois Black selfhood. Against this search for self-definition, cultural activists also marked out a strong tradition of African American creative expression martialled idealized images of Black manhood and womanhood in order to contest what Kevin Gaines has called “negrophobic caricatures.”³³¹ Black Swan Records, within this landscape, positioned consumption as part of a broader practice of racial uplift in the commodity form of the phonograph record. While ideologies of cultural uplift had been translated into ideologies of opera consumption through such figures like Caruso and Farrar, its mirroring in the development of a bourgeois Black phonograph market represents similar cultural claims. Crucially, the Black diva as a commodity would bear strong influence from Black Swan’s cooption of the ideologies of opera as a mode of music listening that yielded moral progress but did so by placing it within the context of racial activism. In this way, the Black diva commodity reflects the ways in which the diva began her ascent into a position of culture where her promises for social equity were premised in the branding and advertising of her various commodity forms like phonograph records.

Nationalism, Race, and Sexuality in *Carmen Jones* (1954):

³³⁰ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xiv.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

From its opening sequence, *Carmen Jones* (1954), a film that would earn its star Dorothy Dandridge the first Best Actress Oscar nomination for an African American woman and arguably one of the central texts for studying the tradition of the American Black diva, calls attention to the cultural assumptions that undergird the Black body within traditions of image and sound in the U.S. More than this, this last case study dramatizes how the figure of the Black diva has come to serve as an embodied icon of Black visibility. In terms of the discussion of sonic blackness, I first examined how racialized constructions of sound influenced performance and music criticism of opera in the 19th-century in the career of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. Drawing on this context, the ensuing case study looked at discourses of Black womanhood featured within the development of “race records” by understanding how Black Swan appropriated and drew on Greenfield’s legacy in its development of the career of Ethel Waters. These two case studies attempted to understand the ways that the performances of blackness and its commodification have been contested throughout the cultural history of the United States. In the second case, the Black diva powerfully underscored an approach to activist forms of consumption that centered shifting ideologies of racial citizenship in the interwar period. In this last section, I look at how this activist vision of the Black diva commodity has been liable for cooption by statist projects involving war and imperialism, suggesting how the quests for full African American citizenship rooted in ideologies of Black excellence provided for conditions in which the cultural language of representation could provide pathways to political representation. At the same time, this cultural language of representation has been used to underwrite the very historical harms that had led to the necessity of cultural and class discernment as a mode of racial uplift in the first place. To this point, I look at the development of *Carmen Jones* as part of the longer history of how Hollywood appropriated the figuration of Black musicality and the Black diva to respond to a rising taste for Black culture

in the 1920s, particularly with the advent of sound films, *and* the nationalist projects in the Roosevelt administration to dampen racial division within the intensities of the Great Depression, New Deal, and World War II eras. These contexts – all coming to bear on the development of *Carmen Jones* – *also* illustrate the growing insinuation of Black inclusion within the cultural marketplace, while illustrating how such inclusion continued to draw on these sonic histories of the Black diva. To this point, *Carmen Jones* not only continues the framing of Black commodification towards statist ends, but the film also allows us to recognize the shifting terrain of Black activism in the United States as part of the social management functions of both political *and* media governance. In recognizing this dynamic, *Carmen Jones* reflects both the optimism and ambivalence of its time, coming in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as an assertion of African American stardom even while rehearsing the terms of segregation in its use of an all-African American cast.

Produced as a CinemaScope feature for Twentieth Century Fox, the film follows Carmen as she is arrested after getting into a fight with a co-worker at the factory. Tasked with taking Ms. Jones to the authorities miles away, Joe succumbs to the temptations of Carmen after initially staying faithful to his girlfriend Cindy Lou (Olga James). When Carmen escapes, Joe loses his promotion and his relationship with Cindy falters. His life declines as his desire and devotion to Carmen grows, leading him eventually to attack his superior. This action forces him to go on the run with the seductress, but when he discovers that she has fallen for a prizefighter, he strangles her in a janitor's closet before he is later arrested. Distinctions of respectable womanhood permeate the film. Trafficking in racial stereotypes, the film's racial ambivalence can be observed in the film's musical elements. Adapted from Oscar Hammerstein II's interpretation of Georges Bizet's operatic score and directed by Otto Preminger, the film opens on a parachute factory in North

Carolina during WWII as a bus of Black workers pulls up to the gate. Exiting the bus, the camera follows Cindy as she walks in her prim, pink dress to the factory's entrance. Drawing upon the sounds of the operatic chorus members, the film's soundtrack fills the segregated conditions of the WWII factory with the lyrics, "Send along another load and win that war, win that war, one more to go, and then one moreB." Here, mirroring musically the historical sounds of imagined Black slaves toiling away at the plantation, *Carmen Jones* voices and visualizes its debts to minstrel traditions of American culture. Taking up these tropes, a group of Black children in dirty clothes, torn in a way to give the image of their being in various stages of undress, echo joyfully the undertones of the first chorus in what looks and sounds like a version of the "picaninny choruses" that Jayne Brown studies, "Wish that I was 21, Old enough to tote a gun, I'd go and be a soldier, they're the ones that have the fun, wish I was a bugler man, Playin' in the army band, I'd blow until I must be playin' in the army band."³³² Inviting these readings of racial stereotypes, the film imagines the segregated environment of WWII military operations while minimizing any recognition of these labor conditions before Harry Truman's decision to end segregation in the military by executive order in 1948. In doing so, this sequence draws on the racial imagination of mid-century Hollywood and puts blackness in service of patriotic identification, a dynamic that illustrates new rhetorical functions of the Black diva by mid-century.

Moments later, Cindy Lou, an image of good girl respectability, is interpellated into the scene's racial imagination, as the guard stops her for her lack of identification. She attempts to correct the seeming misunderstanding: "Oh, I ain't here to work." To no avail, she is forced to wait outside the factory for her paramour Joe (Harry Belafonte). Cindy, unable to pass due to her lack

³³² See: Jayne Brown, "'Little Black Me': The Touring Picaninny Choruses," in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 19-55.

of identification, follows behind the children until she stops to see her lover on the other side of the fence. Upon seeing her, Joe invites her into the factory, taking care to correct the impression that Cindy is anyone other than his gal, a title that would grant her not only entrance into the facilities as a non-worker but more respect in the eyes of the guards. Following Cindy Lou's entrance, Carmen emerges in the next scene as a contrasting model of femininity, marked as a desiring subject while also recalling sexualized racial tropes of Black women, the type of controlling image described by Patricia Hill Collins as the jezebel.³³³ Echoing this narrative logic, Joe and Cindy enter the cafeteria together before a pause later Carmen undertakes their same movement while wearing the notorious bright red skirt of the film's theatrical poster. Upon entering, she attracts the attention and social derision of her female peers over her work habits. "Get a load of this hip-swingin' floozie rollin' around to work in time for lunch," her workmate says as she threatens to go to the foreman with the knowledge that Carmen is late for work again. Threatening to scratch out her last good eye, Carmen pays her no mind, as the audience sees the sexual field of her choosing of at least three men. Joking about the number of her admirers, another workmate offers, "yeah, Carmen, pick out one. That'll release the rest of them."

Representing the introduction of Carmen's voice in the score, "Dat's Love," adapted from "Habanera" in Bizet's original, emphasizes Carmen's vocal declaration: "I won't pick out a man and he won't pick out me." Set against a picturesque image of Black heterosexual respectability, *Carmen Jones* adapts the figure of the opera diva by translating the forms of emotional excess marked in her singing into forms of visual sexual excess, illustrating how constructions of Black

³³³ Patricia Hill Collins writes: "Images of sexuality associated with jezebel and the hoochie not only mark the boundaries of deviant sexualities, they weave throughout prevailing conceptualizations of the mammy, matriarch, and the Janus-faced welfare queen/Black lady. Connecting all is the common theme of Black women's sexuality. Each image transmits distinctive messages about the proper links among female sexuality, desired levels of fertility for working-class and middle-class Black women, and U.S. Black women's placement in social class and citizenship hierarchies." See: Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," 84.

sound have routinely found recourse to the visual as part of their vocal embodiment. Throughout “Dat’s Love,” Dorothy Dandridge performs her music number as a seduction of the character Joe. The choreography visualizes Carmen as burning hot with sexual desire, while the song’s lyrics foreshadow his ill-fated sexual ruin: “You go for me and I’m taboo ... Oh, my baby, that’s the end for you.” In this way, the scene comes to represent the Black diva in an ambivalent manner, pointing to the signs of her sexual agency while recalling historically violent tropes of her sexual availability situated within a narrative that uses these character archetypes to narrate an update on the tragic mulatto archetype. Moreover, it is Carmen’s seduction of Joe that is treated, narratively, as the reason for his professional failure, losing the good reputation and protection of the military in pursuit of his desire. As Neda Atanasoski argues:

Carmen's sexual deviancy, which bears the traces of hypersexualized blackness, stands as the only remaining threat to the assimilability of the good Black citizen, who could have served the nation as a soldier had he not had the misfortune of being seduced by a figure who carries within her the history of European imperialism's primitive other.³³⁴

At the same time, *Carmen Jones* tracks other itineraries of Black female representation in Hollywood, representing, in some senses, new opportunities for African American actresses as models of stardom outside the maid and service roles that characterized their inclusion in Hollywood’s mirroring of Jim Crow America. Traditional emphases on the position of Black women in Hollywood of the period have tended to focus on the primacy of Louise Beavers & Hattie McDaniel and their respective embodiments of the dark-skinned maid and mammy archetype in such films as John M. Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* (1934) and David O. Selznick’s *Gone*

³³⁴ Neda Atanasoski, “Cold War *Carmen* in US Racial Modernity,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2014): 106

with the Wind (1939), while actresses like Fredi Washington and Lena Horne have been read as early Black sex symbols and leads within a Hollywood system of production. These two categories of actress archetypes often reflect still-live distinctions between dark and light-skinned performers respectively, distinctions that have affected casting decisions under the rubric and language of colorism. Charlene Register has noted in her study of the struggle over Black female visibility by actresses that by the mid-1940s “prominent Black actresses in Hollywood films ...less often played a maid/subservient, “mammy,” or matriarch, yet they still function as a shadow for the leading white actress/character.”³³⁵ Part of the reason for this shift reflects the trend of pre-1960s Black actresses, such as Lena Horne and Hazel Scott, who negotiated contracts with Hollywood studios that excluded them from playing roles as maids, thereby recognizing the success of media activists who took aim at such roles for their demeaning representations of race.³³⁶ In this development of a new consciousness that coincided with the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, Hollywood turned towards ideologies of Black female desirability by maintaining a linkage between this body as representative of sexual and racial exoticism for white audiences, a dynamic that plays out readily throughout Dorothy Dandridge’s career. In noting this connection, the development of Black female desirability by mid-century Hollywood traces its roots quite literally to the venue of the Cotton Club and its own racial imagination.

By the time of the film’s release, Dandridge had become a relatively well-known entertainer through film, nightclub performances, and popular music. Reflective of the conditions of mainstream stardom for Black performers, the start of her career is largely associated with the development of a musical act with her sister Vivian and friend Etta Jones (not to be confused with

³³⁵ Charlene Register, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

the more famous Jazz vocalist) known as the “Dandridge Sisters,” or sometimes known as the “Dandridge Trio.” Included as musical acts in films like *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (1935), *It Can’t Last Forever* (1937), *Snow Gets in Your Eyes* (1938), *Going Places* (1938), and *Irene* (1940), the trio’s career was representative of opportunities for Black performers within the context of 1930s Hollywood in which new opportunities for Black nightclub performers came to reflect the convergence of live performance, radio, film, and the recording industries. Availability and preservation of their work has been quite lacking, more so when considering that in many of these films their voices were used without receiving proper credits. What can be surmised about Dandridge’s work with this musical group is situated in proximity to what is known about the career opportunities for Black performers within the context of the 1920s and 1930s. For instance, the Dandridge Sisters would become a popular act at Harlem’s “The Cotton Club,” an establishment that thrived in the prohibition-era environment by providing authentic Black entertainers to a whites-only clientele. Coming off the success of all-black theatrical productions like *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *Shuffle Along* (1921) on Broadway, the Cotton Club opened in 1923 at the same location where Jack Johnson’s Club DeLuxe once stood. As the decade progressed, the venue would become quite influential across various media industries, even helping to create success for musicians on the radio. Partly, this circumstance reflected the success of a weekly radio broadcast that distributed the sounds of the Southern plantation-themed spot and its Black stars as Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Cab Calloway during the late 1920s and 1930s. So successful was the club, it figured prominently in the national imaginary, spawning imitation clubs across the country that promised, like one advertisement for Philadelphia’s New Ridge Cotton Club, “Harlem entertainment at its best.”³³⁷

³³⁷ “Re-Opening of the New Ridge Cotton Club,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 8, 1934, 12.

More than this, the Cotton Club reflected new configurations of public taste and consumption habits for Black entertainment, figuring both within and outside traditions of racial minstrelsy that date back to the antebellum period. While the Cotton Club was a direct allusion to slavery's past, other establishments as Connie's Inn and Small's Paradise provided similar forms of racialized entertainment but were themselves integrated. This entertainment reflected a racial imaginary in which blackness was equated with a kind of sexual and cultural primitivism against white racial yearnings for a kind of vitality and authenticity to modern life, despite the fact that the clubs' patrons who could afford these high prices were spared many of the physical effects and alienation of laboring bodies in modern capitalism.³³⁸ This craze for Harlem entertainment, as Chad Heap has documented, would also serve prominently as backdrops in the literature produced in the Harlem Renaissance in such works as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and Wallace Thurman's *Infants of Spring* (1932).³³⁹ Writing in *The American Mercury*, Rudolph Fisher, a physician and writer, chronicled this craze in an essay entitled: "The Caucasian Storms Harlem." His work attempts to understand the craze for Black entertainment that engulfed New York city during the decade and encouraged commercial migrations across the racial boundaries and geographies of Manhattan. Published in 1927, Fisher writes after a five-year absence from the nightlife scene, coming to realize his own displacement from Black Harlem due to this consumer craze:

³³⁸ On this point, Chad Heap includes testimony from a Louise Norton in her co-edited journal *The Rogue* who "returned time and again to a particular New York black and tan because the atmosphere allowed her to "forget, forget, forget!" To forget what, she did not say, but one might safely surmise that she went to forget convention, if not the very racial and sexual boundaries that separated her from others—and that in forgetting, she intended to give herself over to the basic human urges and desires that she associated with the supposed primitivism of black culture." Chad Heap, "The Negro Vogue," in *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife 1885-1940* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 195.

³³⁹ *Ibid*, 193.

Cabarets are peculiar, mind you. They're not like theatres and concert halls. You don't just go to a cabaret and sit back and wait to be entertained. You get out on the floor and join the pow-wow and help entertain yourself. Granted that white people have long enjoyed the Negro entertainment as a diversion, is it not something different, something more, when they bodily throw themselves into Negro entertainment in cabarets? "Now Negroes go to their own cabarets to see how white people act." And what do we see? Why, we see them actually playing Negro games. I watch them in that epidemic Negroism, the Charleston. I look on and envy them. They camel and fish-tail and turkey, they geche and black-bottom and scronch, they skate and buzzard and mess-around—and they do them all better than I! This interest in the Negro is an active and participating interest. It is almost as if a traveler from the North stood watching an African tribe-dance, then suddenly found himself swept wildly into it, caught in its tidal rhythm.³⁴⁰

In many respects, Fisher's writing offers itself as primary testimony for the Harlem nightlife during the decade. But more than this, Fisher's words draw out the very nature of white fantasy in these spaces particularly as they were constituted through modes of performance and sound that came to be viewed as authentic due to their Harlem locale. Fisher himself draws surprising conclusions from these encounters, questioning "is this interest akin to that of the Virginians on the veranda of a plantation's big-house—sitting genuinely spellbound as they hear the lugubrious strains floating up from the Negro quarters?"³⁴¹ While the relationship of audience and space in the Harlem craze recalls that of the colonial situation, Fisher suggests a hint of optimism about this mixing within a country still in thrall to a Jim Crow legal system: "Maybe these Nordics at last have tune in on our

³⁴⁰ Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *The American Mercury*, 11 (1927), 393-8.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

wave-length. Maybe they are at least learning to speak our language.”³⁴² In contrast to this optimism, writing nearly a decade later, Langston Hughes would observe:

So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers--like amusing animals in a zoo.³⁴³

Early-20th-century New York whites’ craze for Harlem is a significant context for understanding the expansive cultural production of Black artists working in and around commercial systems like Hollywood. First, it helps explicate the ways in which white fantasies of racial entertainment were themselves part of the literary and narrative expectations of the work produced in this period. And second, the artists who gained popularity within this urban context of 1920s and 1930s New York represented the enduring influence of such venues as The Cotton Club on the forms and images of blackness in national systems of media production. When Ellington recorded “Black and Tan Fantasy” with Bubber Miley for Victor Records, he was subsequently offered Hollywood contracts for use of his music and persona, culminating in the release of Dudley Murphy’s short film *Black and Tan* (1929), the follow-up to the Bessie Smith vehicle *St. Louis Blues* (1929). The film, a musical short for RKO Radio Pictures, drew directly on Ellington’s legacy in the Harlem craze of 1920s and 1930s New York with the advertisement of his appearance with “his Cotton Club Orchestra.” The film is also notable for its introduction

³⁴² Fisher, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” *The American Mercury*.

³⁴³ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 225.

of Fredi Washington, an actress who would become known for her work in racial melodramas for 20th Century Fox like *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *One Mile From Heaven* (1937). Set within the Harlem Renaissance, *Black and Tan* narrates Ellington and Washington as a romantically involved couple who face significant hardships in their pursuit of a career in entertainment. Ellington's persona on film dramatizes the linkage between race and class in the U.S., as he struggles to gain performance work as a broke musician whose piano is at risk of being repossessed. Calling attention to more pejorative stereotypes within the history of Black representation, two Black laborers are depicted as in charge of leading this re-possession but are bribed away from their duty when Fredi offers the pair alcohol. Not only representative of the allure of alcohol in the prohibition-era, *Black and Tan* distinguishes Ellington and Washington against these laborers through dress to accentuate a perceived class difference between the cultural capital of artists against the working-class position of the laborers. Washington in pearls and Ellington in tie are distinguished further by their light-skinned appearance, dramatizing historical lenses about intra-race dynamics of privilege in the African American community. These distinctions are echoed both sonically and visually in the cultural production of the period. In 1937, Cab Calloway, a performer at The Cotton Club, would release "She's Tall, She's Tan, She's Terrific," as another example of the types of beauty standards and ideas of Black female desirability within this production context. Promising a "cinema excursion into the great Black metropolis of New York," a British Pathé newsreel "Harlem AKA Harlem, New York" would also illustrate the light-skinned features of the club's female sex symbols, as the emphasis on colorism can be seen by the cast of

performers in the newsreel's focus on Duke Ellington and the hip New Yorkers who traveled to Harlem to watch him perform.³⁴⁴

Following this narrative emphasis on their class status, Fredi discloses to Ellington that she had received the opportunity to perform at a nightclub as its star, to which he warns about the strength of her health. She pays him no mind as the film segues into a tap performance akin to the images regularly viewed at the Cotton Club with a group of men dressed up in long-tail Black coat finery. Taking up the narrative information of Washington's heart condition, the film's aesthetics dramatize the growing fatigue and visual hallucinations prompted by her health. Washington grows faint at the edge of the stage, as the camera's visuals model her kaleidoscopic vision in its view of the Cotton Club orchestra. The modernist aesthetics of the film are quite impressive for the period, demonstrating the exact cascades of moving bodies and objects that Busby Berkeley would make his hallmark years later. Announced as "the inimitable Fredi Washington," she enters the stage for her dance number. Washington is dressed in a style that, perhaps, represents the synthesis of flapper fashion meets the elements of exotic jungle sexuality that were a feature of the Cotton Club's allure. The silhouette of a type of coconut bikini-top and jungle grass skirt are all replaced with long, dangling rhinestones that follow every kick and turn of her body. One image, in a shot that embodies the objectifying nature of the camera lens, is taken from below to view the upskirt image of Washington's writhing body; while in others, the blackness of the performers are accentuated through the extensive use of shadow work. Washington's outfit and moves, recalling those of Josephine Baker in *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), evoke motifs of sexuality and primitivism that have historically been written onto the Black female body as an object and subject of colonial

³⁴⁴ "Harlem AKA Harlem, New York (1930-1939)," YouTube Video, 10:18, Posted by British Pathé, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRQCet13AiQ>.

discourse. At the film's end, Washington perishes in her bed back in the apartment, as Ellington plays piano beside her. This moment of Black death recalls that of the "tragic mulatto," a literary trope that surfaces in many of the narratives produced by Hollywood and mark Dorothy Dandridge's appearances in both *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). The climax, more than offering up the trope of the tragic mulatto, seems to underscore the passion of Washington's on-screen character for her art, having given her body completely for the opportunity of performing in the on-screen parallel to the stage of the Cotton Club and its all-white audience. Such a narrative focus, in some senses, displaces a reflective understanding of how such performers viewed their work within white traditions of 'Black' entertainment, all the while sentimentalizing a kind of extreme physical devotion to that stage for economic survival. Preserved by the National Film Registry in 2015, *Black and Tan* represents not only the frustrating and expanding economic opportunities for Black performers with the introduction of sound in Hollywood film, but it also communicates the growing emphasis on light-skinned female performers as models of sexual desirability.

When news reports were issued about Dorothy Dandridge's casting for *Carmen Jones*, *The New York Times* article included an anecdote from the actress about her casting:

I never worked harder in my life, and it was the best break I've ever had.... Carmen was quite a person, wasn't she? Before I was tested, Mr. Preminger told me I seemed too sweet, too regal, that he didn't think I'd do it. I said, 'Look, I know I can do it. I understand this type of woman.' She's primitive, honest, independent and real—that's why other women envy her.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁵ "On the 'Bright Road' of 'Carmen' and 'Joe,'" *New York Times*, October 24, 1954, X5.

Dandridge's words and their inclusion in the *New York Times* represented part of the publicity lead-up to the release of the film. In a certain sense, they offered a clear example of the tensions inherent in Hollywood celebrity, where leading actresses were expected to embody ideals of female respectability while still offering themselves as desirable objects for the camera's gaze. Moreover, the report of Preminger's words appears somewhat suspect, an example, perhaps, of the forms of publicity that historically mark the interactions between actresses and their public. One reason for this suspicion is due to the seeming amnesia of Dandridge's long-career before her leading role. In the early 1940s, Dandridge extended her fame from the nightclub circuit into her work in Hollywood. These roles regularly found Dandridge taking up the images of exotic Black female sexuality and its association with dance music that was curated and cultivated by the Cotton Club whose on-stage performances would themselves move between the settings of the American South or the tropics in their depictions of race and sexuality. Her small film roles during this period included *Sundown* (1941), *Bahama Passage* (1941), and *Drums of the Congo* (1942) in which she played small parts that embodied the use of foreign, exotic locales to represent interracial desire; as Ellen Scott observes, this practice violated the formal prohibition of depicting miscegenation in Hollywood's Production Code.³⁴⁶ In ways that marked musical performance as spaces of fantasy, one might understand the representation of Black sexuality through song and dance as one strategy that film producers employed to give image and voice to interracial desires, fetishistic as they were visually inscribed, within nationally domestic settings represented in film. This visual representation of such motifs found no greater form than in the production of soundies musical

³⁴⁶ Ellen C. Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 57.

film shorts, where these images of the jazz age's interracial desires would find renewed footing in their influence on the second half of the century.

As Dorothy Dandridge left her musical trio act, she earned opportunities through the associations of Black music, sexuality, and image that marked the masquerade of gender and race in early Duke Ellington short films, others of which include *A Bundle of Blues* (1933) and *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* (1935). Dandridge also found work in soundies, a media form that represents a key site in the critical genealogy of the music video form as it would be known through MTV's emergence as a cable network. Between 1940 and 1947, the Soundies Distributing Corporation of America produced three-minute short musical films for use in visual jukeboxes set up in shopping centers and nightclub venues. As Amy Herzog has studied, the soundies, a kind of visual jukebox from Panoram, did not allow listeners to choose individual songs, only offering its audience a 16mm projection holding an 800-foot loop of film.³⁴⁷ This projection system also offers evidence of the genre system and its relationship to racially-themed entertainment that existed within the context of the 1940s. "Although the soundies catalogue offered the option of customized reels," Amy Herzog notes, "they provided a general outline of what a reel should look like (one vocalist, one novelty number, one ethnic number, one dance number, etc.)."³⁴⁸ Directly voicing the emphasis on ethnic entertainment, Black artists were categorized in a separate "negro" category, illustrating one way that genre categories produced under the conditions of segregation would find continuous echoes throughout the century's industrial imaginings of Black performers.³⁴⁹ Within this category, Black performers like Cab

³⁴⁷ Amy Herzog, "Illustrating Music: The Impossible Embodiment of the Jukebox Film," in *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones*, eds. Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 35.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Dorothy Dandridge were all listed, illustrating the enduring influence of the Cotton Club's curation of performers in Black media production in at least the following two decades. Dandridge's films for the soundies catalogue included *A Jig in the Jungle* (1941), *Swing for my Supper* (1941), *Lazy Bones* (1941), *Cow Cow Boogie* (1942), *A Zoot Suit with a Reet Pleat* (1942), and *Paper Doll* (1942) that embodied the sexualization of her star image within her Hollywood films of the decade, yet also provided her new forms of agency and stardom within the changing conditions of media industry.

Writing in "Illustrating Music: the Impossible Embodiment of the Jukebox Film," Amy Herzog writes "instead of reading Soundies as linear constructions, it may be more productive to view them as constellations of images."³⁵⁰ Herzog's statement, in part a reaction to Michael Chion's claim that the music video image represents a return to silent cinema, i.e. a liberation from the linearity normally imposed by sound, refers to the ways in which "each element within the soundie works as part of this mobile assemblage, but the overall effect is rarely one of harmonious synthesis."³⁵¹ She concludes: "The uncomfortable melding of abstract and representational elements in the soundie opens the musical-image to multiple, critical interpretations—readings that perhaps would be foreclosed by more slickly produced or narrative-based works."³⁵² Within this schema, the soundies, in Herzog's reading, become a site of polysemous potential for the ways in which they exist outside the representational dynamics of Hollywood narrative, particularly situated within a period where the Production Code still had teeth in regulating the scripting of

³⁵⁰ Herzog, "Illustrating Music," 39.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 39-40. In the passage Herzog describes, Chion writes: "This is yet another way in which the music video leads us back to the silent cinema—seemingly a paradox, since we're talking about a form constructed on music. But it is precisely insofar as music does form its basis, and none of the narration is propelled by dialogue, that the music video's image is fully liberated from the linearity normally imposed by sound." See: Michael Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 167.

³⁵² Ibid, 40.

race and sexuality. While recognized in the delineation of her methodology, Herzog's essay leaves underexamined the historical lineages of images of race, gender, and sexuality presented within the soundie that help discipline some of their polysemous potential. Her recognition of the failure of direct, linear translation between sound and image as constitutive of an impossible embodiment of the jukebox film positions her reading of music as a nonrepresentational art in terms of narrative. Yet, this focus on music as 'nonrepresentational' does much to obscure the historical situation of music and film within the context of the late 1920s and 1930s through the associations of Black sound and image that were constituted by categorizations of music by the early recording industries, reified by Hollywood sound films, and anchored imaginatively in the same categorizations that characterize the soundies' systems of production, exhibition, and distribution. In this history, music is bundled together through systems of promotion, media industry convergence, and consumption habits that can never yield a theoretically abstract notion of a pure musical text. Moreover, the soundies, while revealing surprising syntheses of sound and image, offer, to borrow helpful aspects of Herzog's language, the constellation of associations by which race has been formed *and* represented in popular culture, demonstrating the same contestations over cultural production that have long marked the Black voice and image. Elsewhere, Ellen Scott has argued that these three-minute film shorts constituted a strange liberatory discourse for Black performers. In her analysis, the soundies illustrate "how stereotypes are both invoked and undermined; how Black working-class people occupy public space in carnivalesque ways; and how surprisingly directly and intimately they depict Black sexuality and Black women's public personae."³⁵³

³⁵³ Ellen C. Scott, "Black Movement Impolitic: Soundies, Regulation, and Black Pleasure," *African American Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Fall 2016): 205-206.

Building on the historicity of these forms of Black representation, most discussions of *Carmen Jones* frequently displace attention to the political symbols that the film martialled in its representation of African American musicality. Of course, *Jones* would not fit conventional constructions of bourgeois racial self-determination, particularly reflected by the fact that the film was conspicuously absent in *The Crisis*'s reporting. Moreover, an initial consultation between Executive Secretary of the NAACP Walter White and Otto Preminger's teams did not yield necessarily much in terms of script changes, but White concluded that the NAACP would not be able to support the film due to its image of segregation at a moment where African American activists were seeking claims to the full protections of the federal government and access to the consumer marketplace against segregation laws. This consultation reflected the regular practice of Hollywood production companies consulting with the NAACP so as to preserve, not alienate, their African American audience. To be clear, these consultations, while fostering some senses of inclusion, did not always change the racist image-making found in 1930s films like the Antebellum romance of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or Shirley Temple's performance in blackface in *The Littlest Rebel* (1935). As these consultations occurred, Hollywood still engaged routinely in minstrel traditions of performance throughout much of the decade as also featured in Judy Garland's use of blackface in *Everybody Sing* (1938) or Al Jolson's performance as minstrel bandleader E.P. Christy in *Swanee River* (1939). The all-black cast musicals, within this context, represented alternatives to the practical effects and make-up of blackface performance while embodying some of the very same racial fantasies of innate musicality and sexualized jazz beats. Megan Williams details the challenges of Hollywood's wartime all-black cast films particularly in defining the struggle over the image of Black womanhood. The actress Lena Horne, star of Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), was initially apprehensive about her time in

Hollywood in advance of the film's release, reflecting her hope, shared at first with Walter White, that the actress would avoid playing maids in order to protect her ability to play other parts in Hollywood.³⁵⁴ In Williams's framing, she characterizes the distinctions between activist bourgeois critical and literary framings of cultural politics versus the cultural politics of creative laborers working in the industry whose interests are more rooted in their ability to continue working and performing. While some respect of these concerns reflected forms of Black cultural activism against the performance work of the Mammy archetype most associated with Hattie McDaniel, new forms of representation reflected calls in the Black press for a deeper respect of African American belonging within the nation and its film reels.

Writing before U.S. entry into World War II, Clarence Muse would write in *The Chicago Defender* a critique about the negative depictions of Black men and women in Hollywood film:

DO YOU THINK any of these PICTURES have DONE anything to GLORIFY the NEGRO? Not only as a NEGRO but a CITIZEN, who is as WORRIED about his future as any other GROUP? CHECK them closely and you will FIND that the NEGRO has never RISEN above the DOMESTIC Cycle.³⁵⁵

Muse's editorial expresses the debates around cultural representation that marked Black media activism of the period, reflecting a belief, one that is foundational today of Black cinema and media studies, that cultural images are directly at the root of debates about citizenship, belonging, and public policy in how the state treats its minority populations. While a segment of scholars has attempted to push beyond debates of cultural representation, thinking that they blur too simply into

³⁵⁴ Megan E. Williams, "The "Crisis" Cover Girl: Lena Horne, the NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941-45," *American Periodicals*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2006): 215.

³⁵⁵ Clarence Muse, "What's Going On In Hollywood," *The Chicago Defender*, April 6, 1940, 21.

asserting a binary of good vs. bad imagery, others, rehearsing Marxist critiques of postmodernism, lament how the image as spectacle, in Guy Debord's terms, represents the mediation of social relations that have emptied a certain cognizance of "the real." Yet, such perspectives aiming to critique representation as discourse as nothing more than ideologies of consumption and consumerism – of which they are in part – refuse to square themselves with a history of activism that has worked in tandem with what is often viewed as 'more authentic' or 'more material' bases of political struggle in the form of redistributive economic policies. Whereas many may be willing to dismiss the cultural marketplace as a site of 'legitimate activism,' doing so erases the broader work of movements to reshape *all* aspects of society, including the very forms of representation that help constitute not only the state's relationship to its marginalized populations but the forms of labor available to marginalized communities through existing hierarchies and audience formations in cultural industry. More to the point, representation does not just exist in terms of good and bad binaries, but it is constituted through historical genealogies that shape our imagination of race, gender, and sexuality as key dividing lines in U.S society. To understand the vogue of imagery that constitutes present forms of cultural production is to invite historical questions about the histories that have come to shape our own desires for representation, not only to be represented ourselves but the ideologies that shape our own consumption of social difference through media.

Reflective of this absence, little scholarship has worked to place *Carmen Jones* within this tradition of racial liberalism by tracing its World War II context, both represented in the film's setting but also in the initial production context of its stage show. *Carmen Jones*, in its appearance on Broadway, reflected the spirit of African American belonging under the Roosevelt administration. In *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt*

Era, Lauren Sklaroff examines the cultural policy of Roosevelt’s Great Depression and World War II agendas. This period is one marked by racial ambivalence, often rehearsing the similar sensations of social justice that would characterize many modern presidencies but particularly Clinton and Obama’s where a national celebration of blackness in the cultural marketplace is incommensurate with political attention on civil rights reforms to address continued histories of hate crime activity, violent policing, and unequal standards of life for African Americans in the United States. Within this cultural agenda, efforts by the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Arts Project, including both the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) and the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), shaped cultural efforts to foster the arts in African American communities before other wartime projects would manage perceptions of the U.S.’s racial divisions like the Office of War Information.³⁵⁶ In the FTP, federal funding would be used to continue artistic practices centered by the Harlem Renaissance in which Black folk traditions sought to adapt classical texts and forms. As Sklaroff notes, the program’s administration had considered “musical elements” as a positive feature of most scripts, a point also observable in the development of musical films with Carmen Miranda for the U.S. Good Neighbor Policy, such as *The Gang’s All Here* (1943).³⁵⁷ Importantly, the federal project’s search for mixing classical genres and texts—racially coded as white in many senses—with Black cultural expression would be a significant influence on *Carmen Jones*, a film that replicates such artistic agendas in its negotiation of Bizet’s opera within the idiom of an erroneous-but-authentically-positioned African American dialect. In this sense, the ideology of racial mixing represented in these programs and the work they valued, by Sklaroff’s study, reflects an attempt to integrate Black art and performance within the national canon. When

³⁵⁶ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

such agenda-setting is produced and undertaken by white administrators of New Deal programs and their ideological influence through an array of other channels, including Broadway and Hollywood, illustrates how such racial activism can come to embody the very strategies of segregation. This unintended reformulation of segregation through art undermines the original intent of such policies to promote the racial mixing of U.S. society through how such programs call upon fantasies, constructions, and imaginations of race.

While 20th-century New York accentuated race as a musical brand and modern commodity, *Carmen Jones*, a musical adaptation of George Bizet's *Carmen*, premiered on the Broadway stage running from December 2, 1943 to February 10, 1945. *Jones* represented an articulation of new assemblages of genre, race, and national identity within the context of the legitimate forms of performance as represented by Broadway, the setting through which the development of national musical tours was anchored. Whereas Bizet's musical was set in and around the Spanish city of Seville, Hammerstein's adaptation of *Carmen Jones* takes place in the American South. This point, however, should not be lost, as *Carmen*, an opera particularly associated with European-ness, was adapted into not only American locales but also its supposed idioms. Here, *Carmen Jones* represented a firm and substantive intervention in debates around vernacular opera that had taken place within the late-19th-century but had been invigorated with the introduction of the phonographic industry. As Annegret Fauser writes, "Hammerstein's radical adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* pushed the debate also into the broader contemporary discussions about a national theater, its genres, and its languages."³⁵⁸ Much of this discussion was condensed around the conditions of World War II and the growing anxiety around German and Italian cultural heritage, Fauser argues,

³⁵⁸ Annegret Fauser, "'Dixie *Carmen*': War, Race, and Identity in Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* (1943)," *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2010): 148.

whose nations firmly situated as part of the Axis Powers, gave greater concern for the development of American vernacular traditions within opera.³⁵⁹ This process of translation, in one notable review, celebrated the “all-Negro” cast and production for its modernness. In fact, the reviewer, Lewis Nichols, contextualized his appreciation for *Carmen Jones* as possibly representative of a larger movement in New York’s musical and theatrical culture that saw the Metropolitan Opera House as having “outlived its usefulness,” stating: “For years the scholars on the Metropolitan beat have been saying something should be done about “Carmen,” that the score would make a wonderful score for a rousing musical. They have been right, of course, and the new show at the Broadway Theatre proves it so.”³⁶⁰ While critical and popular consensus proved the play popular, one dissenter, writing in *The New York Times*, expressed concern over the translatability of Bizet’s opera. Noting that the work had originally drawn on the sound of Basque and Spanish-French border culture, he noted: “The English language, and especially the Negro idiom, does not fit and fill Bizet’s melodies properly, as far as I feel it.”³⁶¹ This complaint seems to be drawn from Hammerstein’s attempted mimicry of what might be perceived as an “authentic” African American vernacular. Hammerstein, particularly sensitive to the impression that his work might be seen as a vulgarization of the original, worked to position his characters as fundamentally drawn from the fabric of national life during World War II: “they are simple, everyday, honest American Negro war workers, soldiers, human beings.”³⁶² These tensions around cultural legitimacy, race, and sound are issues themselves that would come to the fore within the film adaptation of Hammerstein’s work, particularly as its production can be seen as an example of enforcing racial

³⁵⁹ Fauser, ““Dixie *Carmen*,”” 148.

³⁶⁰ Lewis Nichols, “About *Carmen Jones*,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1943, X3.

³⁶¹ See: Eric Greiffen Hagen, “Drama Mailbag: On ‘*Carmen Jones*,’” *New York Times*, January 9, 1944. Quoted in Fauser, “Dixie *Carmen*,”” 153.

³⁶² Richard Maney, “Billy Rose and ‘*Carmen Jones*,’” *New York Times*, November 28, 1943, X1.

boundaries between the racial geographies of sound and image in its decision for Dorothy Dandridge to lip-sync to the barely established and white opera singer Marilyn Horne's voicing of the score.

Further, the image of the African American soldier had been a key point of deliberation within the context of World War II. The Office of War Information, as Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black note, specifically focused on navigating the relationship between African Americans and the war effort through cinema, literature, and other forms of art.³⁶³ In 1942, OWI ended up publishing a pamphlet entitled "Negroes and the War" in order to manage the public opinion of African Americans. Whereas Southern politicians found the material subversive and Republicans called the pamphlet electioneering materials, actual members of Black communities were resistant to the pamphlet's overstressing of racial progress in the United States.³⁶⁴ Theodore Stanford, writing in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, noted, "the Office of War Information's cheap, propagandistic, and unattractively thrown-together hodge-podge ... will neither inspire nor placate the restive millions of American Black folk who observe in ... daily life a refutation of even the minimum ideals for which the United States ... pretend[s] to be fighting." Within its contents, "Negroes and the War" attempts to distinguish the United States from Germany and Italy through a rhetoric of national freedom, a messaging scheme also at work in Frank Capra's first episode of his *Why We Fight* (1942-45) series. The pamphlet, typical of New Deal rhetoric, aimed to *inform* as much as it attempted to propagandize to its audience. The writers, in rendering this address, did not attempt to represent the idea that all freedoms had been entirely achieved for Black citizens. Its method of argumentation – what it would conclude as "Progress? Yes. Too Slow? Yes; but

³⁶³ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II," *The Journey of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Sept. 1986): 383-406.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 390.

progress” – was to examine the growth of a Black middle class’s representation in professions as physicians, teachers, and lawyers, and dentists against colonial efforts by Italy and Germany in Africa.³⁶⁵ Within the pamphlet, the writers also took pains to dramatize visually the distinctions between the former situation of African Americans in the United States with their present-day rights. Ignoring legal conditions of the Jim Crow South, one picture was captioned, “Two Ages: Slaves



dragging their chains through the streets of

Figure 10: “Two Ages” from “Negroes and the War” (1942)

Washington just before the Civil War (from a contemporary engraving), and Negro boys of today studying the graven countenance of the Liberator at the Lincoln Memorial.” Reflected in this statement is the way that New Deal writers sought to directly analogize the freedoms earned within the context of the Civil War as coterminous with the fight for freedom in Europe (fig. 10).³⁶⁶

More particular to the Black diva, other high-profile moments of this agenda featured Eleanor Roosevelt’s advocacy on behalf of Marian Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to approve her concert at Constitution Hall. These public performances of blackness against cultural conditions of racial prejudice and segregation within the context of Jim Crow America, as Janell Hobson observes, complicates existing African American studies literature as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s

³⁶⁵ Chandler Owen, “Negroes and the War” (United States: Division of Public Inquiries, Office of War Information, 1942), 4.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

politics of silence and Darlene Clark Hine's politics of dissemblance that reflected strategies of privacy in self-policing of Black women's image of respectability.³⁶⁷ For Hobson, Marian Anderson's performance, along with Billie Holiday's in "Strange Fruit," embodies "the nuanced struggle between meeting the demands of their work, community, and nation and their own individual demands for artistic expression and vocal autonomy."³⁶⁸ While Hobson's work seeks to frame this publicness in terms of a performative practice of resistance, it is important, also, to complicate the existing political histories of such publicness and visibility, being sure to note that the assertions of Black dignity through the individuality of Black performers, particularly informed by prior branding and stagecraft of such identities, reflects obvious tensions with collective politics and not for a lack of intention. Moreover, such visibilities, framed by networks of political, industrial, and cultural influence, often conceal an array of agendas that provide these conditions for such spectacles of racial justice. Decades later similar practices would be employed by Black performers like Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, and Lionel Hampton, as Lonneke Geerlings notes, who participated in the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) in its efforts to strengthen Cold War relations between the United States and African nations as part of the public negotiation of the U.S.S.R.'s diplomatic messaging about American racism.³⁶⁹ These encounters illustrate the ways in which cultural claims of Black visibility, in some ways, have been foundational to U.S. policy apparatuses in their attempts to exchange recognition of Black culture in place of disruptive compromises to existing political and governance coalitions like the later

³⁶⁷ Janell Hobson, "Everybody's Protest Song: Music as Social Protest in the Performances of Marian Anderson and Billie Holiday," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2008): 443-48. See: Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, NY: New Press, 1995), 380-87; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1992): 251-74.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Lonneke Geerlings, "Performances in the Theatre of the Cold War: The American Society of African Culture and the 1961 Lagos Festival," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2018): 1-19.

Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party that would form in the late 1940s. Through such examples of cultural diplomacy, it appears that, perhaps, human dignity may yield important framings for the necessity of civil rights advocacy, but this visibility, pursued on its own terms, is vulnerable to political opportunism.

In the film's rollout, *Carmen Jones* raised many of these longstanding historical issues about the nature of Black performance in public spaces, as well as the spectacle of Black female sexuality in modernist approaches to racial representation. In Dallas, the NAACP organized a picket line over a local theater's segregated seating arrangements, a development that occurred following the theater's allowance of Black patrons.³⁷⁰ For its Southern box office, 20th-Century-Fox announced that it would hold white-tie premieres. Designed as charity benefits, these white-tie affairs reflected industry understanding that they could expect an unprecedented Black audience for the film due to its all-black cast. Importantly, these incidents illustrate, in a certain way, how industry formulations of audience seek to draw out direct correspondences between media consumers and on-screen visibility.³⁷¹ While these aspects were touched upon in the trade presses, *Carmen Jones* would appeal to the same mixture of respectability and sexuality that had marked certain framings of popular blues queens like Mamie Smith in how she became refracted into advertising and industry discourse. In one ad, *Carmen Jones* would announce its status in terms of Broadway authority, "The Great Broadway Musical That Ran 16 Smash Months on Broadway.. 2 Solid Years Throughout the Nation... Now On The Screen And Coming Your Way..."³⁷²

Just as the operatic diva had sold the technology of the phonograph through the language of cultural uplift, *Carmen Jones*'s appearance as a title on CinemaScope would situate the film as

³⁷⁰ "Negro Picket Line," *Variety*, April 13, 1955, 2.

³⁷¹ "White-Tie Premieres for Dixie Buildup of Negro 'Carmen Jones' Release," *Variety*, Nov 03, 1954, 1.

³⁷² "Carmen Jones," *Variety*, Oct 13, 1954, 19.

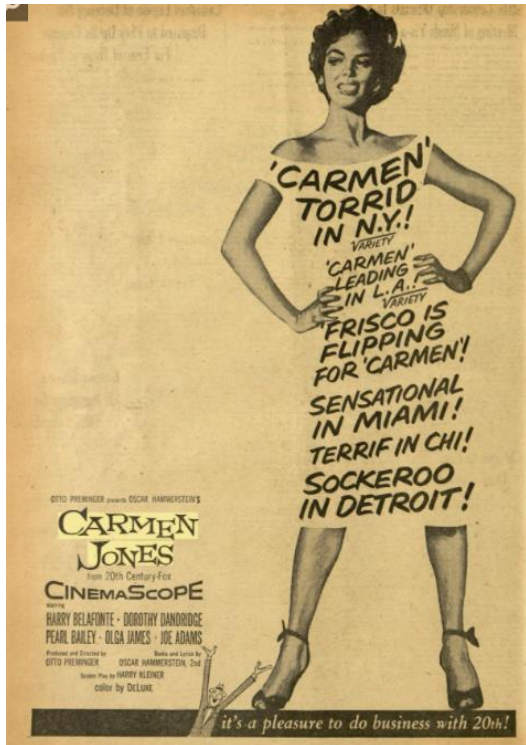


Figure 11: *Carmen Jones* Advertisement (1954)

Black sexuality. Reflective of this line of inquiry, other advertisements more explicitly promised Dandridge’s body as part of the language of sensationalism used to sell the film. One would show reviews of the traveling exhibition of *Carmen Jones* written across Dandridge’s body, so as to draw out the understanding of her body’s circulation as, perhaps, recalling of the sexually-forward persona she plays in the film (fig. 11).³⁷⁴ Publicists and an array of film critics would sell the sexual fantasy of the film, *even* to Black readerships. Indeed, in *New Journal and Guide*, Hedda Hopper’s quote appears on the advertisement, warning the audience about the sexual heat of the film, “Hope you won’t repeat my

³⁷³ “Carmen Jones,” *Variety*, Oct 20, 1954, 12-13.

³⁷⁴ “Carmen Jones,” *Variety*, Nov 24, 1954, 14.

experience when you see ‘Carmen Jones.’ I got so excited I burned a hole in the front of my dress. Yes, the film is that hot” (fig. 12).³⁷⁵ On the topic of this sexuality, some critics in the Black press would voice questions of moralism, noting Dandridge’s display of “a sensuous leopard skin one piece undie.”³⁷⁶ The critic concluded by asking, “How does it get pass the Hollywood office of Mr. Breen?”³⁷⁷ Other critiques in the press had been over the use of a “black dialect,” reflecting for the publication’s Black readership, perhaps, the inauthenticity of the film in its supposed trafficking in 19th-century constructions of Black sound.³⁷⁸



George F. Brown would make this observation in *Courier*, noting:

I know of other nationality groups who are never forced to speak dialect in films. Why Negroes who can speak English better than a lot of other nationality groups? Granted that a lot of Negroes do speak a sort of patois, it also stands that a lot do NOT. What can an accent add to a picture? This is preserving a stereotype in lounge drape suits and pretty frocks, nothing less. First place, Negroes resent this. After all everyone in the cast is

³⁷⁵ “Moton Brambleton at Park Ave,” *New Journal and Guide*, February 5, 1955, C22.

³⁷⁶ “Moralists Blast ‘Carmen Jones,’ ‘House of Flowers,’” *Variety*, January 8, 1955, 16.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ Chester L. Washington “Will Dialect Kill ‘Carmen Jones’?: Everyone Agrees That ‘Carmen Jones’ Will Be a Handsome Movie.. But will the Dialect Hurt Its Boxoffice chances?” *Courier*, September 11, 1954, SM8.

obviously Negro, so why try to point out this fact further by distorting the language they use.³⁷⁹

At the same time, *Carmen Jones* created a stir amongst Black performers who identified artistic and commercial ambitions in understanding the significance of the film as a representation of African American national belonging. The film's flouting of the mainstream assumptions of film production and race caused optimism that there would be new opportunities for African Americans in the entertainment industry. Reflecting on the lessons of *Carmen Jones*'s financial success, *The Hollywood Reporter* suggested that the film had upended the economic wisdom of traditional Hollywood. For example, among these issues included the "making of a picture with an all-Negro cast" and "mixing opera with jazz and soft-pedaling of opera." Passing \$4,000,000 in domestic gross and a promising foreign market, the film suggested that such subjects could be viewed more reliably to make money. *The Hollywood Reporter* concluded, "it's possible to take any of the "don'ts" singly or combine one or more and come out with big entertainment, raking in plenty of that most necessary ingredient of any picture mixture – money."³⁸⁰ This recognition upset delicate balances in Hollywood, while promising greater ambition of artists, particularly those working in nightclubs, who had wanted their talent agents to find opportunities for them outside of touring circuits.³⁸¹

This optimism is notable considering the frustrated conditions of racial representation featured in the film, particularly as it upset the forms of visibility politics in Black middle-class imaginings of cinema. In the film, the de-coupling of body and voice of the film's key roles best

³⁷⁹ George F. Brown, "No Cover Charge: Will Dialect Sell *Carmen Jones*?" *Courier*, July 31, 1954, 18.

³⁸⁰ "Otto Preminger, a Pretty Smart Cookie," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 3, 1955, 1.

³⁸¹ Joe Cohen, "Top Negro Names Put Agents on Spot; Demand Bookings Beyond Café Circuit," *Variety*, March 16, 1955, 55.

embodies the extent of these frustrated conditions of Black representation. The stars of the film, Dorothy Dandridge, as the eponymous character, and Harry Belafonte, playing the role of Joe, were both known for their vocal work. The two had starred together in the film *Bright Road* (1953), as a teacher and principal who attempt to get through to a troubled Black youth at the school where they work. While Dandridge had been known prior for her nightclub and musical singing, Belafonte was relatively newer to the scene whose vocal work had included a folk album, *Mark Twain and Other Folk Favorites* (1954), for RCA Victor nearly half a year before his turn in *Carmen Jones*. Despite their career's musical roots, the two's voices were dubbed for the operatic score by mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne known at the time for providing vocals for television and LeVern Hutcherson, Black, who had appeared on Broadway in *Carmen Jones* and in a revival of Gershwin's racial melodrama, English-language opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1953. Official reasons for dubbing in *Carmen Jones* were originally organized around the operatic demands of the score on the voices of its talent, a premise that seemed to maintain racial boundaries between popular music and opera that were observable in the case of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. One *Daily Boston Globe* article explained: "neither she [Dandridge] nor Harry Belafonte, cast as Don Jose (just Joe in the picture) have operatic values despite their success in popular music."³⁸² Not insignificant, similar oppositions were erected in even critical praise for the original production of *Carmen Jones*, wherein Lewis Nichols attributes a certain kind of weakness of the Black voice within the context of prestige at the Metropolitan Opera House: "The principals have come from various places, some of their voices more fully trained than the others. Probably for the most part they could not be heard in the last seats of the Metropolitan Opera House, but at the Broadway they are

³⁸² Marjory Adams, "Dorothy Dandridge Given Voice of Another in 'Carmen Jones,'" *Daily Boston Globe*, November 17, 1954, 31.

more than satisfactory.”³⁸³ Other roles, particularly Pearl Bailey’s performance as Frankie allowed the singer to use her original voice ostensibly due to how easily her number, “Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum,” fits within genres attributed as ‘authentically’ Black. One article for *New Journal and Guide* would write: “Pearl Bailey does her own singing, because demands on her voice are not operatic.”³⁸⁴ While actor Olga James was able to record her voice for the part of Cindy Lou, the acts of dubbing in the film still invites clear questions about the authenticity of vocal genres and the performance of race on-screen, particularly as such distinctions have been marked as historical considerations in the formation of performance traditions and music genres. Jeff Smith answers this question:

Preminger’s and Fox’s insistence on operatic voices in *Carmen Jones* ultimately falters as an explanation for the use of dubbing, since it cannot explain why some voices were dubbed but others were not...publicizing Bailey’s appearance in *Carmen Jones* and her own “inimitable brand of singing,” Preminger and Fox beg an obvious question: why deny Dandridge the right to sing the part on the ground that her voice is not operatic when Bailey’s voice is manifestly even less operatic?³⁸⁵

Part of this answer, as it has been developed through a study of the cultural conditions that led to *Carmen Jones*, is through the racial fantasies of culture that historical criticism and branding left untouched in the popularization of African American stardom within the context of recording industries and its translation into forms of Hollywood production as its own type of Black

³⁸³ Nichols, “About Carmen Jones,” *The New York Times*.

³⁸⁴ “Operatic Performers Sing Roles for Film,” *New Journal and Guide*, October 23, 1954, 15.

³⁸⁵ Jeff Smith, “Black Faces, White Voices: The Politics of Dubbing in *Carmen Jones*,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 51 (Spring 2003): 33. Smith argues elsewhere in his essay: “By severing the “natural” link between black bodies and black voices, the dubbed voices in *Carmen Jones* appear to question the very categories of race that were circulating in American culture in the 1950s by juxtaposed two quite different systems of race relations that are correlated with the technological separation of sound and image.” See: Smith, “Black Faces, White Voices,” 31.

commodity that created a range of expectations not only of vocal sounds *but also* those performing bodies as instruments. These expectations are another way in which claims of the non-representational status of sound is challenged by the cultural conditions organized, arranged, and produced by commercial industry.

Conclusion:

In this chapter, I examined shifts in the branding of the Black diva's performing body as it would appear in three historically situated periods that marked this body's emergence within the conditions of stage, phonograph, and film stardom. Across these phases, I have labored to show how this body has been contested by audiences, critics, touring managers & production companies, and the divas themselves to represent this performing body as a critical site of race's embodiment and its significance as a public category. First, I looked at how Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield disrupted and appropriated racialized conventions of vocal performance within the context of the 19th-century, wherein she came to embody imagined and frustrated visions of social change. Representing how discourses of sound are built around this gendered and raced body, Greenfield's publicity staging shows how Black female performers have long been positioned within what Kobena Mercer has called the burden of representation. From there, I tracked how Greenfield's mythos was appropriated by the emerging Black middle class and intellectual tradition of racial uplift to reframe cultural consumption in terms of ideologies of consumer activism and cultural citizenship through Black Swan Records. In this re-mediation of Greenfield's operatic celebrity, the diva commodity's promise of cultural uplift became situated around further distinctions of race through class by looking at the rhetoric of Black Swan Records. In their framing of Ethel Waters compared to her competitors like Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith, this branding featured carefully

constructed representations of racial performance that would position Waters within extant structures of respectability and racial distinction of the 1920s.

To end, I examined how this ideology of activist consumption became co-opted for statist ends by Roosevelt and his World War-II administration, wherein the funding of public opinion agencies and Black cultural projects aimed at creating a distinct form of national unity in terms of a broader war effort. Within this context, the Black diva became a symbol of racial integration of dominant institutions of society, particularly as Dorothy Dandridge became nominated for the 1955 Academy Awards as included within formal industry structures. Arising from these conditions, *Carmen Jones* also represented the ways in which older racial imaginations of visibility politics and uplift ideology have been reconfigured particularly for statist ends, while recognizing the ways that this film depended upon its fostering of Black desirability in its marketing campaign. These case studies reflect the ways in which ideologies of race were inscribed into the development of technological mediums and new forms of entertainment, while showing how these inscriptions refracted into debates over the meaning of cultural consumption itself.

Importantly, this investment in consumer activism through cultural consumption represents a pressing and dynamic history when considering contemporary debates about “cancel culture.” Writing in *A Consumers’ Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen examines the politics of mass consumption in the U.S. by contextualizing it historically as a distinct citizenship practice. Originating in part through progressive activism of the early 20th-century, Cohen locates an intensifying link between consumption and citizenship practices particularly in the World War II era where housewives managed the home front through domestic and civic duties, as African-American communities contended with the unequal conditions of citizenship in a marketplace that regularly denied them

full access to housing, restaurants, and public transportation.³⁸⁶ Denied participation and ownership of her voice in the 19th-century, the 1920s Black diva seized on the respectability of culture and notions of female celebrity to assert African American belonging within the nation through the marketplace. The negotiation of the symbolic economy of the Black diva's performing body is strongly situated within this history, particularly as the Black diva commodity attempted to embody activist desires for then-contemporary ideologies of racial uplift in federal theater projects and new cultural activism in venues like Broadway and Hollywood (culminating, perhaps, in both *Stormy Weather* (1943) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943)). These advertising themes, moreover, were also situated within the conditions of interracial desire that existed in and around the forms of urban culture popularized and distributed through the emergence of new mediums and technologies of sound in the late 1920s and 1930s. Within this context, the embedding of technology into society can be observed in its re-wiring of social consciousness through gender and race ideologies. In this context, the emergence of the Black diva commodity shows how activist visions of stage and sound traditions became central sensations mediated by new technological mediums. Respective to *Divas Live*, these discourses of celebrity branding, though particular to the period of multiculturalism in the 1990s, reflected the logical ends of branding and advertising discourses centered around the contestation over the symbolic economy of the Black diva's figuration in terms of the nation. This branding rhetoric has deep roots in both the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, where older ideologies of morality, civilization, and uplift became inscribed into the discursive conditions of consumer advertising and new entertainment technologies of the early 20th-century.

³⁸⁶ Lizbeth Cohen, *Consumer's Republic* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004), 13.

So far, this dissertation has tracked the ways that cultural commodities – particularly celebrity in a transmedia understanding of cultural industries – have seized on the critical structures and defined absences of social difference in early media industry. This environment produced conditions wherein the diva negotiated the terms of her representation against racial constructions of sound and the social organization of bodies through casting and music genres. Charting the rise of the mid-century Black diva, I have tried to illustrate the varying layers of contestation projected onto the Black female body in performance by including the views of industry functionaries, critics, and the divas themselves in their quest to claim ownership over the commodity of their blackness. These explorations reflect what I may later develop and term the “cultures of censorship” to diagnose the ways in which conditions of censorship refract into societal struggles over cultural consumption itself as part of broader social debates about who has access to the national marketplace of culture and the ways censorship and historical struggle mark the affective resonances and intensities of the performing body. To this point, the next chapter explores how these conditions of censorship anchored perceptual meanings in the branding of sexual performance on the next significant transformation of this study, the televisual diva of Madonna. Her career’s situation within the development of MTV as a cable network allows for us to understand how Madonna’s performance of celebrity inscribed certain viewing relations and themes of citizenship in the diva commodity offered by MTV’s branding of its television network. Drawing on the influence of the phonographic Black diva, contemporary divas, those arriving in the aftermath of MTV, illustrate how performances of sexuality, framed against the shadows of censorship, are conditioned by industrial discourses of promotion as part of a broader political practice within the history of women’s representation.

Chapter Three: Framing Sexuality through Censorship: MTV, the Diva, and Her Body's Politics

"Female passivity, like commitment, is out of style. The lyrical wimp, who Hayakawa heard whining in "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," has been replaced with the EST-inspired assertiveness of such feminist anthems as "I Will Survive" and "It's My Turn." In fact, the top female recording stars of the mid-eighties – Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Sheena Easton, and Tina Turner – seem to be speaking for a whole new breed of woman – bold, tough, and materialistic – ("Girls Just Want to Have Fun," "Money Changes Everything," and "Material Girl")—seeking, along with equal pay, equal sexual satisfaction – with or without a partner. ... "When we consider that cocaine is now peddled in the corners of our schoolyards, and that the rate of teenage pregnancy "leads nearly all other developed nations of the world," (11) might it not be worthwhile for semanticists and journalists (as well as sociologists) to give serious attention to the content of pop songs and to evaluate not only what its lyrics are *saying* to society, but more importantly, what they may be *doing* to it?"

--Sheila Davis, "POP LYRICS: A Mirror and a Molder of Society" (1985)³⁸⁷

"Hey, hey they say I better get a chaperone (Ha ha ha)
Because I can't stop messin' with the danger zone
Hey, hey I won't worry and I won't fret
Ain't no law against it yet"

--Cyndi Lauper, "She-Bop" (1983)

In December 1990, Madonna appeared on ABC's *Nightline* to discuss public reaction to her "Justify My Love" (1990) music video and MTV's decision to ban the short film from its airwaves. The video's premiere had been planned as a spectacle on MTV following a 48-hour marathon of Madonna's videos, concerts, and interviews. Directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, the video visualizes sexual fantasies of the singer and her various lovers in a Paris hotel room, while emphasizing sexual elements like leather, BDSM, and bisexuality.³⁸⁸ While the video had been banned on MTV over fears of its sexual explicitness, the controversy led to many of the video's images being shown in their entirety and cut up for television segments discussing the backlash to it. In the *Nightline* interview with Forrest Sawyer, the video had been telecast in its entirety before the singer appeared to discuss the issue of music and censorship. When asked if her videos were eroding the boundaries of moral permissibility in popular culture, Madonna argued that her boundaries were over the presentation of violence, humiliation, and degradation. Unsatisfied with this answer, Sawyer observed that her "Express Yourself" (1989) music video had featured images

³⁸⁷ Sheila Davis, "Pop Lyrics: A Mirror and a Molder of Society," *Et Cetera*, Vol. 42 (1985): 167-69.

³⁸⁸ Stephen Holden, "That Madonna Video: Realities and Fantasies," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1990, C18.

of her chained and crawling underneath a table. Embodying the new rhetoric of sexualized performance that would mark the diva's relationship to culture war programming on television, Madonna countered forcefully, "I've chained myself, though, okay? There wasn't a man that put that chain on me. I did it myself. I was chained to my desires. I crawled under my own table. Y'know, there wasn't a man standing there making me do it. I do everything by my own volition. I am in charge, okay?"³⁸⁹ Within the context of the early 1990s, Madonna's argument asserted her own expressive, artistic agency over her sexuality within the context of music censorship debates that had erupted throughout the 1980s. In doing so, Madonna's performance of diva celebrity on television illustrates how the diva commodity, drawing on activist senses of cultural consumption, came to position herself in opposition to the conditions of censorship that had developed through coalitions between feminists, religious groups, parents, and the U.S. Congress about contemporary music's deleterious effects on the nation's youth.

This social and cultural context is one often neglected in studies of modern divas and their relationship to television as a medium that had undergone much innovation and social friction as traditional ideologies of mass media were challenged with the introduction of cable television. Resulting in CNN, MTV, and later Fox, MSNBC, and Bravo, new platforms for cable television provided opportunities to challenge the very social relations that would organize the diva commodity's relationship to cultural uplift that had dominated earlier in the century. As the racialized atmosphere of Reagan's America turned its surveillant eyes towards the wombs of young women and particularly Black women, fears about the explicit presentation of sexuality in music would focus on the specter of teen pregnancy. Drawing on ideologies of social contagion

³⁸⁹ Accessed via "Madonna Nightline Interview December 3 1990," YouTube Video, 14:19, Posed by "A. Doss," April 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duzoq8HPCsw>.

advanced by scientific academic disciplines, also observable earlier in the century by the Payne Studies used for censorship advocacy in cinema, social activism against MTV's relationship to sexuality would become a central piece in the arrival of the culture wars as an issue mediated within the home by television. A retrospective glance at the 1980s reveals, perhaps, why this domestic disruption posed by television would embroil MTV's music culture in moral panic and maternal concern.

Just as the phonograph had been "domesticated" through women's commercial advertisements and promises of cultural uplift that had fit within dominant ideologies of true womanhood from the 19th-century, the television had arrived in the nation's homes throughout the 1950s with a similar ideology of respectability and domesticity. As Lynn Spiegel argues in *Make Room for TV*, the postwar moment featured the transference of "the primary site of exhibition for spectator amusements ... from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of the home."³⁹⁰ Whereas the 1950s saw the installation of television sets into nearly two-thirds of households, the 1960s saw average television consumption soar to almost five hours of television per day.³⁹¹ Spiegel asks how it is that television came to be such a recurring part of people's daily routines. Her answer, in part, is to reflect on how discourses on television both drew upon and magnified what she terms as "the more general obsession with the reconstruction of family life and domestic ideals after World War II."³⁹² Within this context, 1950s television had drawn on the domestic family ideal in such sitcoms as *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and other shows, while public interest requirements from the FEC had incentivized the production of respectable entertainment as opera and concerts through advertising support in such programs as *NBC*

³⁹⁰ Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL and London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

³⁹¹ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁹² *Ibid*, 2.

Symphony Orchestra (1948--1952) and *NBC Opera Theatre* (1949-1964). If the domestic ideal has long been associated with the framing of middle-class white women within cultural and technological formations, then it is not surprising that cable television's unsettling of these domestic environments through new sensational imagery would raise, of chief concerns, tensions around women's sexuality, racial geographies of urban space, and moral threats of social contagion affecting children whose telecasts passed the threshold of the home.

Within the context of the 1980s and 1990, cultural moralists seized on new sensationalized imagery for youth in Hollywood television, film, and music from horror movies to "skin flicks" to performances of female sexuality and race on MTV. Rooted in ideologies of media effects as explanatory influences in the rise of urban violence, school shootings, and teen pregnancy, these moralists, encompassing radicals, liberals, conservatives, and religious reactionary constituents, reflected the intense struggle over culture as a way of controlling social relations and disciplining generational behavior. From Sen. Jesse Helms's attempted conservative buyout of CBS to the Parents' Music Resource Center's politicization of music lyrics, this period of history, in many ways, reflects the terms of "culture wars" that would dominate many accounts of political debates of the 1980s and 1990s.³⁹³ Within this programming, cultural debates largely played out the legacies of various civil rights movements from the 1950s to the 1970s, resulting in unprecedented attention to feminism, queer politics, and anti-racism within national life, while such concerns, at

³⁹³ To be clear, ideological debates over the function, value, and morality of public culture and entertainment cannot necessarily be seen as a recent phenomenon entirely, particularly when considering the waves of censorship that had dominated theocratic principles of Christian nations in the medieval period. James Davison Hunter tracks culture war debates existing in several fields of debate as the law, media, and education among other sites. For the purposes of my dissertation, I have looked at these cultural tensions and debates through the emergence of new technological mediums of culture and the ways that they have sought to resolve the social crises sparked by new forms of cultural modernism. See: James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992). For a greater discussion of the culture wars in terms of defining a post-Civil Rights landscape, see: Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

the same time, were being parceled into new consumer niches through media revolutions in publishing, television, and film production.³⁹⁴ These cultural debates require an explicit attention to the political catastrophes generated in response to these civil rights movements, which feature the racial backlash of Richard Nixon's presidency, the eroding of New Deal-era programs and social safety nets through racialized austerity rhetoric, the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment due, in part, to fears that women would lose their economic rights, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic that brought governmental passivity in the face of queer death. To be clear, the diva commodity owes much to the intersections between performers and civil rights by many of the mid-century's popular music divas from Aretha Franklin to Nina Simone to Bette Midler, among others. Understanding these shadows of the 1980s helps understand how programming shifts on MTV, sensational as they were, intersected with new ideologies of the diva commodity that came to center this celebrity within the fallout of these cultural debates. At the same time, this centering of diva celebrity within these debates *also* offered the development of MTV's cable platform to be branded as a site of alternative citizenship practices through cultural consumption against the political hegemony of conservative backlash to civil rights.

In this chapter, I look at how the representation of the diva's sexualized body became positioned within broader consumer practices that contested conditions of cultural censorship by advocating for women's self-expressive agency. In postfeminist media criticism, scholars have examined how particular forms of sexual objectification have persisted in the aftermath of feminism's critiques of popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Within this critical tradition, analytical focus has largely paid attention to postfeminist culture's embrace of women's sexuality. Attentive to forms of sexual humor and play that continue the objectification of women through a

³⁹⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, 29.

masculinized media address represents what Angela McRobbie has called “the disarticulation of feminism” to refer to the ways in which postmodern knowingness has been attached to new forms of sexual representation by heightening the signification of sexist ideology through ironic play.³⁹⁵ Elsewhere, other scholars, such as Rosalind Gill, have referred to this new cultural environment for how it transformed the representation of women’s sexual objectification by men into sexual subjectification, i.e. self-objectification, wherein systems of image production like advertising socialize the sexualization of young women as its own kind of violence, a theme echoed in Sut Jhally’s particular interest in music videos.³⁹⁶³⁹⁷ More contemporaneous to the period of the 1980s was a strong re-deliberation on obscenity standards, following the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s that created new standards of judicial review that subsequently led to the explosion of the pornography industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Reform groups like Women Against Pornography, associated with the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, would advocate restrictions to pornography around assumptions that its genre of images constituted forms of social violence towards women. This reading of images as violent, in many senses, is not possible without societal transformations in image reading practices of the female body that can be best embodied by feminist constructions of the male gaze by scholars like Laura Mulvey, whose work’s theorization of the camera as a masculinized social apparatus has been instrumental in advancing a variety of representational politics. This theorization, to be clear, also reflects the gendered

³⁹⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 25.

³⁹⁶ See: *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video*, DVD, Directed by Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1995).

³⁹⁷ Gill writes “There has also been a shift in the way that women’s bodies are presented erotically. Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as the passive, mute objects of an assume male gaze, today women are presented as active desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so...” See: Rosalind Gill, “Supersexualize Me! Advertising and the “Midriffs,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 257.

hierarchies of commercial industry of prior decades that had asserted some level of control over the regulation and representation of women's sexuality through venues like the Motion Picture Production Code, while some of the most significant purveyors of women's sexuality in media history have been figures like Mae West and Jayne Mansfield. In this context, the development of a sexually infused and culturally raucous youth culture, owing to the synthesis of the film, music, and television industries of the 1950s and 1960s, is a significant development for understanding the debate over sexual representation, obscenity, and pornography as types of gendered violence that would permeate the 1980s. Moreover, these ideas of music and music video's social harms often became entangled in debates about the social morality of America's youth in often very classed, racialized, and gendered ways. While not radically new, the sex panics of the 1980s would be significant for how a backlash to certain elements of this moral hysteria would be encoded into the technological medium of MTV, advanced by the forms of provocation and sexual self-possession by figures like Madonna.

Within this context, the diva took on new resonances of nationalism often by the ways that she became situated within existing cultural tensions and debates from the 1960s and 1970s that began to appear, in some senses, as a generational struggle about the morality of the nation on the one hand and the progress of the nation itself on the other. In this modern period, the diva commodity, originally having enjoined cultural supremacy with technological human progress, divorced these traits from each other. Offering these new forms of intimacy with cultural progress through new consumer niches represented cable television's influence on shifting ideologies of cultural consumption from cultural refinement to themes of national belonging and citizenship. An example of promotional media, music videos often drew on advertising partnerships with

companies like Pepsi and Adidas, while looking as glossy as such advertisements, too.³⁹⁸ To be fair, artistic movements on MTV also sought to capitalize on the cultural legitimacy of film in their hiring of directors like John Landis and Martin Scorsese. While female artists had embraced the visual performance of their gender, this aspect was often shared by male rock videos that had featured sexual fantasies of women in their music. These distinctions within music videos as forms of promotional media reflected a variety of different types of video production on the channel. These videos, importantly, also operated outside of the uniquely heterosexual point of identification that many of MTV's critics would root their assumptions about the use of female sexual imagery. Importantly, I do not attempt to use this chapter's inquiry into the sexual representation of women in music video to settle any of these social questions. The topic, to be clear, has been documented by an array of critics who have largely posited sexual imagery as an innate form of sexual violence or defenders who claim these images are reflective of forms of sexual revolution by privileging the branded agency of capitalist women. Providing answers to these questions would reflect an attempt to resolve debates that simply cannot be grounded with any cultural authority due to how these debates often obscure shifting historical points of view between new and changing conceptions of gender, sexuality, and culture. What I do hope to understand is the way that discourses about sexuality became framed in MTV and adjacent youth culture against and through ideologies of domesticity and censorship as ways for female stars to re-claim the female body as a feminist act in their performance work. Against this context, authenticating progressive or oppressive performances of womanhood in popular culture is less

³⁹⁸ For a strong discussion of this history of Pepsi-music partnerships, see: Joanna K. Love, *Soda Goes Pop: Pepsi-Cola Advertising and Popular Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019). Love's work follows a number of scholars tracking the development of music and advertising partnerships throughout the 20th-century, particularly Timothy Taylor's focus on the 1960s as the central point of emergence for the soda company's shift towards the music industry and a youth demographic for its advertising. See: Timothy Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

interesting than understanding how television, through music culture, became deeply embedded within debates about cultural and consumer citizenship. This dynamic, in particular, has intensified through the revolutions by cable television in the 1980s and 1990s, revolutions that would directly give way to VH1's *Divas Live* charity series.

Re-claiming Girl Culture in Popular Music:

The politics of girl and women's culture on MTV requires proper situation to understand how the structures of its format would produce critical oppositions that a variety of female artists would seize upon throughout the decade and a half that marked the height of MTV's video era. The emergence of psychographic understandings of audience – wherein demographic categories merge with quasi-psychological ones to tailor media or marketing to audiences as consumer niches – helps us understand this landscape. In his industry study *Inside MTV*, R. Serge Denisoff would contextualize how the network's programming became rooted in notions of white musical performance due to the construction of its format, particularly in its address towards a rock music demographic, a construction of music genre that had demonstrated exclusionary biases towards genres of music framed as 'Black' by industry categories. Lisa Lewis, in her study of this earlier period of MTV, would recognize how MTV's head, Bob Pittman, and his search for a rock demographic reflected a specific set of ideological assumptions about the nature of this demographic and the types of performers and sounds that would be best suited for this audience. Situated within anti-commercialist rhetoric about pop music, these critics frequently created hierarchies of authenticity that limited the credibility and agency of female performers and musicians. Because commercial industry, historically, has been the site of an intense gendering, carrying on divisions of public/private spheres that signify men and women's roles, the performance of sexuality, expressions of physical desirability, and postmodern play of fashion

have been highly contested categories of empowerment for female performers and audiences. These frictions over women's agency feature hierarchies of authenticity that are rooted in distinctions between serious music and commercial hitmaking that can be traced to the struggle over the meaning of music consumption in the formation of the phonograph industry.

Modern versions of these dichotomies, persisting, have been recorded in oppositions of rock music versus pop music. As Lisa A. Lewis writes:

In an ideological division reminiscent of the high culture/popular culture distinction, rock discourse forged a hierarchy within popular music by creating a structure of value against which pop music could be devalued. ... Pop music was negatively defined against rock's professed artistic superiority. Pop's reliance on formulaic musical structures and on conventionalized repetition in form and lyrical context was subjected to aesthetic standards of uniqueness and complexity borrowed inappropriately from high art culture.³⁹⁹

Lewis roots this hierarchy, partly, in the mythos of rock and music criticism, borrowing from Simon Frith, that positions the instrumental sounds of rock music as "a last romantic attempt to preserve ways of music-making—performer as artist, performance as 'community.'"⁴⁰⁰ Embodying what Dave Laing referred to as the "ideology of sincerity" of the lyrical "I," rock has traditionally been understood as a more genuine genre of music production.⁴⁰¹ Lisa A. Lewis argues that this discursive construction of rock music as a more sincere form of music-making against commercial industry "encourages a position of political opposition to the capitalist organization of cultural production, yet at the same time it denies the extent of capitalist control

³⁹⁹ Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 29.

⁴⁰⁰ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 1.

⁴⁰¹ Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015), 81.

over its own creations. Rock songs, like pop songs, are created under the rubric of industrial production and distribution.”⁴⁰² For this reason, the historical development of rock music as a cultural discourse has tended to privilege the authenticity of white male musicianship by gendering and pathologizing fandom through images of female spectatorship. This division recalls the broader situation in which cultural consumption is usually treated as highly gendered, a treatment that is often recalled in the ways that advertisements have negotiated, in some senses, a female address in lifestyle images due to the historical position of many middle-class women as purchasers of goods for the home and their subscription to lifestyle and consumer magazines. Importantly, this context of the gendering of rock musicianship recalls traditional but erroneous cultural binaries of men as producers and women as consumers when used to mark out female vs. male subjectivity. These gendered constructions of musicianship and the ideology of music consumption are ones that would be re-worked and fused within the history of youth culture that would follow in the wake of MTV.

The introduction of cable TV, particularly through networks acquired and founded by Viacom, would yield promising brand potential for what Laura Ivins-Hulley has referred to as the “narrowcasting of feminism” on television networks like MTV that yielded such programs as *Daria* (1997-2002).⁴⁰³ Sarah Banet-Weiser has studied the ways that Viacom’s other network, Nickelodeon, constructed a particular vision of childhood citizenship while also gendering this address in terms of girl power, a phrase that marks out the ways in which cultural commodities are branded as empowering young girls.⁴⁰⁴ Against this context, the construction of marketing identities in the late 1990s would also pay particular attention to this notion of girlhood, as Gayle

⁴⁰² Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV*, 30-31.

⁴⁰³ Laura Ivins-Hulley, “Narrowcasting Feminism: MTV’s *Daria*,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2014): 1198-1212.

⁴⁰⁴ Banet-Weiser, “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon,” in *Kids Rule!*, 104-141.

Wald tracks in her discussion of Gwen Stefani's performance of white girlhood.⁴⁰⁵ While some analyses have tried to employ discussions of authenticity to understand whether such branding of girl power in popular culture should be treated seriously, such discussions of authenticity often obscure the cultural tensions within specific media environments that illustrate, at the most basic level, the reasons why certain audiences might be attracted to girl power media in the first place. Representing the projection of inauthenticity to pop music, society's antipathy towards the commercialism of music has often been expressed by pathologizing the branded female audience. In "Girl Culture, Revenge and Global Capitalism," Catherine Driscoll analyzes how the fan material of the Spice Girls with its themes of girl power worked to position the girl group as empowering the every-girl. Examining the fan website, Driscoll argues that its content conforms to the editorial conventions of girls' magazines with such examples as the personality quiz like the ones featured in *Cosmopolitan*. Towards the height of the band's career in 1997, Australian MTV, in fact, offered a '6th spice' competition in which the lucky fan could win hairstyling, cosmetics, a personal trainer, and a trip to Rome for the European MTV awards to hang with the Spice Girls directly.⁴⁰⁶ This contest captures the essential elements and experiences of fan contests that are premised on the fan achieving a certain legibility of a grandiose self in proximity to the adoption of core characteristics of pop stardom. In the case of the Spice Girls, this legibility of a grandiose self is through the taking on of core cosmetic principles of stardom, i.e. the maximization of performance potential through body maintenance, in order to make the fan capable of embodying the role of the sixth spice girl. Moreover, as Catherine Driscoll observes, these "conventional 'girl'

⁴⁰⁵ Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1998): 585-610.

⁴⁰⁶ Catherine Driscoll, "Girl Culture, Revenge and Global Capitalism: Cybergirls, Riot Grrls, Spice Girls," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 14.29 (1999): 175

prizes ... suggest that what is being invoked here is identification *with* and *as* Spice Girl.”⁴⁰⁷ At the same time that groups and artists like the Spice Girls market their identification with young girls as their primary fan audience, gendered discourses work to marginalize the respectability of this attachment. Driscoll, here, emphasizes the dismissal of the group in the various jokes from Chris Rock’s hosting of the 1997 MTV Video Music Awards. In her estimation, the monologue turned the Spice Girls into the running joke of the telecast, seeming to assert that the group’s celebration of girlish themes restricted their social dignity.⁴⁰⁸ Driscoll writes, “Not only was their talent at issue, but their claims to have a political agenda were dismissed.” Chris Rock joked:

No matter how bad you think a song is. It ain’t about that. It’s about the video. I know you going, ‘Spice Girls,’ how did they get nominated? Hey, they had good *lighting*. ... Spice Girls a big thing. Spice Girls. Like Ten million records sold. I can’t find one person that will admit to buying one. Nobody admits to buying a Spice Girls record. They’re cool and all. ... Spice Girls are kind of like heroin. You know somebody’s doing it but nobody admits it. Every time I see the Spice Girls the only thing I can think about is Josie and the Pussycats.⁴⁰⁹

Comments like those featured in Chris Rock’s monologue contribute to longer critical histories of the language used to reject girl and women’s culture as overly commercial, often by explicitly pointing to the use of fashion and sexuality as somehow oppositional to an artist’s expressive capacity. Within the context of her work, Driscoll argues that it is precisely the Spice Girls’s relationship to this historical context of the girl market that explains how popular recognitions of the girl audience have typically led to more direct claims about the delusional quality of girl

⁴⁰⁷ Driscoll, “Girl Culture,” 175.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 174.

⁴⁰⁹ “1997 Host: Chris Rock,” *MTV*, September 4, 1997, <http://www.mtv.com/vma/video-clips/wtqo8v/1997-mtv-video-music-awards-1997-host-chris-rock>.

fandom.⁴¹⁰ Indeed, critical narratives about the Spice Girls routinely took issue with them as a pre-packaged commodity. Chris Rock's reference to Josie and the Pussycats in his VMA monologue reflects the shifts in the historical imagination about female music stardom over the past several decades. When the Archie Comics series was adapted by Hanna-Barbera and CBS in 1970-72, the producers had conducted a talent search for musicians who could perform as the band for an album. Eventually, Kathleen Dougherty as Josie, Cherie Moor as Melody, and Patrice Holloway as Valerie were selected to play each member of the band. The ability to record an album and increase the reach and profitability of the animated series was what made the production deal attractive for Hanna-Barbera. While the series would only last two seasons, Josie and the Pussycats came to symbolize a certain narrative about female girl groups and artists as industry-controlled handmaidens of capitalist industry.

To this point, the revival of the franchise in *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001) directed by Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan and distributed by MGM and Universal Pictures directly took up this theme. Casting Rachael Leigh Cook, Tara Reid, and Rosario Dawson as the pussycats, the film's story features the discovery of a hypnotic backing track on the album of recording group DuJour. This hypnotic track is positioned in the film as part of a subliminal and propagandistic effort with the United States government to hide subliminal messages that brainwash teenagers into consuming products. Of course, this narrative presents a satirical edge on the formation of the youth market and the centrality of music recording artists within broader corporate media and advertising partnerships. Martialed through music, television, and film industry convergences, these developments can be observed in the film career of Elvis Presley or TV hits like *American Bandstand* (1952-1989). MegaRecords, the villainous label of the film, is forced to find a new

⁴¹⁰ Driscoll, "Girl Culture, Revenge and Global Capitalism," 177.

music group to monetize for its capitalist mission. Soon after, the record company finds the amateur rock band, Josie and the Pussycats. Throughout the film, the costs of fame prove to be quite difficult. The band almost breaks up as the relationships amongst the girls grow tense. The coerciveness of the music industry is highlighted throughout the film, as musicians who come to resist the use of their music as a form of consumerist mind control are killed. In so doing, the later adaptation of *Josie and the Pussycats* represents the ways in which fictional narratives about the music industry dramatize perceptions about pop music as a culturally passive form of consumerism by rooting these perceptions in themes and narratives of the commodification of women and their bodies. In significant ways, the televisual divas that represent the transformation of music industry within the context of the latter half of the 20th-century are informed by a resistant reading of consumption as *merely* objectifying women's bodies for global music industry, often by re-signifying such commercialism through ideologies of self-display and entrepreneurialism (discussed later in Chapter Five). If the emergence of the diva commodity form in the early 20th-century promised a rhetoric of cultural uplift before the promise of an activist vision of culture, its transformation within the arrival of cable would combine these features in an intense struggle within the medium of television over the symbolic economy and agency over women's culture, their sexuality, and artistic expression.

Significantly, these hierarchies of authenticity are observable in media produced following the merging of popular music celebrity with the public relations capacity of television in the 1950s. Crucially, while teens dancing on *American Bandstand* has widely been viewed as part of the emergence of a national youth culture facilitated by the medium of television, this history also extends to renewed attention to the significance of music consumption within the context of the 1960s, as television helped make music itself more visual than it had been previously. To be sure,

partnerships between music and visual modes of production had occurred in the classical period of Hollywood. As discussed in Chapter Two, partnerships between a number of Black entertainers from blues and jazz music yielded a significant amount of talent for early sound shorts as Duke Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1929) and Bessie Smith's *St. Louis Blues* (1929). New forms of transmedia stardom, to be sure, were also significant features of this visual-sonic landscape of the 1930s. Peter Stanfield has recovered the importance of how the singing cowboy, featured in such stage personae as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, was advantageous for the radio industry of the period, particularly as this figure fit within sponsorships targeted towards rural and non-urban markets, often as juxtapositions to the racial modernism of jazz.⁴¹¹

Transformations of television's relationship to music re-signified the sensations and images of white youth and their consumption and the gendered metaphors these images frequently encapsulated. Such images can be observed in extant film texts that took up these images in their representation of female youth. When Conrad Birdie (Jesse Pearson), a fictional rock and roll star from Columbia Pictures' *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963), receives a draft notice for the U.S. army, his fans protest the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington D.C. This march of fans borrows from the iconography of Civil Rights protests of the period, as young women form a procession towards the capital building with handmade signs. These images of picketing demonstrate the political energy of fandom, as signs all announce: "Don't Draft Conrad Birdie," "Uncle Sam is Unfair," and "Leave Us Our Leader!"⁴¹² As the camera takes a low angle upon the protesters, John Daly, the CBS anchor, emerges into the shot and starts reporting from the scene about the current teenage crisis. Images of Daly's broadcast are then seen on a television set by an outdoor pool area. Around the

⁴¹¹ Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.

⁴¹² *Bye Bye Birdie*, DVD, Directed by George Sidney (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1963).

TV, a large group of female teenagers are seen socializing in the water and on pool lounge chairs. This kind of scene of teenage culture evokes the same imagination as American International Pictures' teen skin films perhaps best represented by *Beach Party* also in 1963. Acknowledging the location of a national youth culture around the pool or the beach, as a nod to Southern California (fig. 13), would later be a familiar image within the visual archive of the teen film, a production design echoed in the opening credits of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) to The



Figure 13: Television and Teen Culture in *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963)

Muffs' rendition of "Kids in America."⁴¹³ In *Bye Bye Birdie*, the initial scenery of teenagers at the pool is replaced with the images of young women crowding around a storefront featuring this fictional CBS broadcast.

This transition marks not only the linkage of music with the gendering of fandom as female, but it also represents the ways in which music's youth culture represented an imagined community and shared sense of public life for teen audiences through the resources of the televisual medium.

Inspired by the happenings of Elvis Presley's draft in 1957 and adapted from the original 1960 musical, *Bye Bye Birdie* illustrates the ways in which the visualization of rock music culture used gendered images of fandom to resolve contradictions within rock music industry. While rock music had premised its authenticity of male expression against the conformity of commercialism, popular recording artists, in some sense, managed this cultural understanding by displacing the

⁴¹³ *Bye Bye Birdie*.

corporate organization of music onto ideologies of the audience, rather than the performers using television as a promotional medium for their work. This displacement can be observed within the subtle form of historiography that marks Conrad Birdie's stardom within the film. After its end, Daly's initial broadcast segues into a short segment on the rise and celebrity of Conrad Birdie. This moment in the film, of course, works to inform the audience of the relevant biographical information about the fictional singer. At the same time, it works to parallel and satirize the history of Elvis's career. Immediately in the segment, comedic sound effects are used to punctuate unflattering close-ups of Conrad Birdie's face. Additional images point to a parodic touch on the system of images used by advertising media. Close-ups of Birdie's teeth are arranged and cut together to create the effect of a flashing smile; at the same time, the design of this segment, the telecast image presented in a fake television frame, works to evoke the type of promotional images of cosmetic teeth and chewing gum products featured on teen programs like *American Bandstand* throughout its run. Following these images, the celebrity commentary presented in *Bye Bye Birdie* works to bring out the heterosexual elements of fandom. The flashes of Elvis's teeth segue into light, frothy orchestration against images of young female voyeurs. Such connections work to position female consumption and voyeurism as premised on a form of spectatorship that privileges women's heterosexual desire. Again, this motif is returned to as the special edits photographs together to suggest the mythology of Elvis's gyrating hips on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956. At one point, editing effects create the illusion of Birdie pulling his viewer inward with his arms. The following cut is to a silent image of a teenage girl screaming and then to another with her hands over her eyes in astonishment. At another point, this sexual appeal is rendered more explicit as a series of medium close-up shots on Birdie's leather-clad pelvis further create this illusion of gyration more directly. Indeed, these images matter precisely for how they narrow the terms of

fandom for women and girls as structurally a heterosexual mode of consumption. At the same time, these sequences also suggest the growing dimension of music celebrity as a visually mediated phenomenon, underscored, perhaps, by the emphasis on visual renderings of sexual appeal.

Moreover, *Bye Bye Birdie* directly presents this form of teen fandom as itself a product of multi-generational gendered conflict. This framing is immediate from the beginning of Daly's broadcast that features almost exclusively images of fans as young white women. Moreover, one of the film's protagonists directly takes up the opposition of male musicianship and female music fandom. Albert Peterson, played by Dick Van Dyke, is a failed songwriter in his family's business of music before he convinces Conrad Birdie to sing a song of his own composition on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Peterson views the success of his music career as the necessary impetus for his girlfriend's mother allowing them to marry. Their resulting scheme is for Conrad to perform the song "One Last Kiss" while kissing a randomly chosen fan goodbye before leaving for the army. In this way, *Bye Bye Birdie* creates a narrative in which the masculine protagonist's ability to reach heterosexual romantic fulfillment is premised on his ability to reach a more dignified status of artistry by exploiting the promotional and sexual excesses of female fandom. The lucky girl chosen to be Conrad Birdie's kiss is Kim MacAfee (Ann-Margret) who sees her own receipt of publicity as an opportunity to create an economic boom for her small town of Sweet Apple. Fandom and desire for publicity become a romantic problem in Kim's life, as her desire for fame creates the impression of her lack of romantic commitment to boyfriend Hugo. In so doing, the film identifies the sexual forms of desire in fandom as a narrative problem before Kim and Hugo seek romantic conciliation at the end of the film. In a multitude of ways, such images of fans highlight how categories of fandom participate in contestations over the patriarchal control of women's bodies and their sexuality. This theme is further expressed within the film as the town's boys express hate

towards Birdie for catching the eye of their romantic partners. Here, the sexual agency of young women is also echoed in the narrative tension around Kim's father Harry MacAffee (Paul Lynde) who rejects having his daughter be seen kissing on television, until the whole family can gain an appearance on the show.

Importantly, I mark this transition between the mocking of girl-targeted media represented by the Spice Girls on MTV and the gendering of musicianship and fandom in the 1960s as an impact of televised musical experience to show how these tensions and discourses are significant for understanding the phenomenon of the televisual diva, as a performative figure violating these oppositions to re-orient the gendered matrix of musician/spectator that informed the arrival of music's organization in television. To this point, scholars have long noted that social constructions of rock music as major cultural phenomenon drew upon metaphors of gendered hysteria that informed images of female fandom that absorbed, performed, and refracted this trope. The image of screaming girls during the arrival of the Beatles in the United States has taken up a level of representativeness in the visual imagination about media fandom. As Barbara Ehrenreich et al. observe, the marketing of the Beatles and other rock artists were dependent upon cultural hysteria, precisely as they illustrated how rock music, despite its gendering of authenticity, reveals its own imbrication into the systems of production and promotion in capitalist industry. They write:

First there were the reports of near riots in England. Then came a calculated publicity tease that made Colonel Parker's manipulations look oafish by contrast: five million posters and stickers announcing 'The Beatles Are Coming' were distributed nation-wide. Disc jockeys were blitzed with promo material and Beatle interview tapes (with blank spaces for the DJ to fill in the questions, as if it were a

real interview) and enlisted in a mass ‘countdown’ to the day of the Beatles’ arrival in the United States.⁴¹⁴

This cataloguing of the various forms of publicity symbolizes older approaches to audience management before not only social media but the internet, too. Ehrenreich et al.’s account of the technologies of music fandom points to the ways in which attention is organized across several sectors of the cultural industries and the role that disparate media technologies play in making new forms of fandom legible to the public. Similarly, these gendered oppositions are observable in Richard Lester’s *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) that illustrates not only the gendered hysteria of girl fans chasing The Beatles but also the ways in which forms of homophobic humor against the sweater of the television director also conceal the forms of aestheticism that mark the array of camera movements adding to the visual sensation of live performance on TV. More than this, however, the fictional accounts and representations of fandom matter for how they reflect the gendered viewing relations of audiences in ways that help provide explanatory power for the historical interest in the reclaiming of girlhood, women’s culture, and the body within the context of the diva on MTV in the 1980s.

Bye Bye Birdie’s images of fandom, moreover, can be viewed as problematic precisely as they draw upon familiar narratives of female hysteria that are used to denigrate the critical and cultural agency of women. Specifically, *Bye Bye Birdie* humorizes cultural antipathy towards women’s culture. When the young girls finally meet Conrad Birdie at the town’s center, rows and rows of dozens of teenagers and women put their hands on their chest to recite “The Conrad Birdie Pledge.” Kim and her best friend Ursula (Trudi Ames) are presented with their fan club pins, as

⁴¹⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 99.

the camera provides the image of a sea of young white women looking at their teenage idol. They recite, “I, being of sound mind and body, do hereby promise to be loyal, courteous, steadfast and true, to Conrad Birdie and the United States of America—both indivisible, with liberty, and justice for all!”⁴¹⁵ The pledge, as can be seen, draws out the interconnections between celebrity and sexuality through the language of national identity; moreover, this scene works to produce and call upon a sense of a shared identity of female fandom. In response to the pledge, Kim tells Birdie, “as the fortunate girl whom you have selected to represent all my fellow girls, I welcome you.” Her words, thus, invite the audience to think of Kim’s status as a representative subject of female fandom. This matters precisely as the scene draws out the gendered underpinnings of the familiar visual imagery of fandom, the screaming images of female fans popularized by television shows. As Conrad Birdie performs his gyrating number “Honestly Sincere” in the town square of Sweet Apple, the musical number culminates in the sexualized screams of female fans who seem to serve as part of the call and response of Birdie’s gyrations. The song’s conclusion takes up the positioning of female fandom in terms of female hysteria at its most intense. Following his performance’s end, Conrad Birdie’s receives the key to the city as the camera segues into the survey of the city square that is littered with the bodies of previously ecstatic but now fainted fans. Some of the survivors appear to be taking on the imagery of wartime photography as characters like Hugo nurse Kim’s motionless body. Here, *Bye Bye Birdie*, in making its joke about the hysteria of female fans, embodies longer histories of rock music that appear to make light of the cultural status of young women.

⁴¹⁵ *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Indeed, the disciplining of audiences through proper listening and viewing relations is observable by returning to the historical period of the 1950s and 1960s as the site of social unrest. *Bye Bye Birdie* recalls this Civil Rights imagination through how it visualizes female fandom of Conrad Birdie as a type of social and political movement, as can be seen at the film's beginning when the fans march on Washington to get Birdie discharged (fig. 14).⁴¹⁶ The elements of satire within the



film are produced precisely out of fandom's **Figure 14:** Music Fandom as Civil Rights in *Bye Bye Birdie* potency to organize masses of people. The shared sense of connection with the phenomenon of Conrad Birdie that permeates the film recalls the similar ways that *American Bandstand's* images of music consumption, too, worked to create the shared feeling of a national youth culture by organizing the youth demographic as a television market. As Matthew F. Delmont observes, *American Bandstand* offered a "visual component to Anderson's theory of imagined communities." While Anderson's work takes up the image of an imagined community as it can be felt through journalistic textual production, Delmont argues that *American Bandstand* worked to visualize this imagined community as one located in Philadelphia "through its studio audience, viewer letters, and maps, and by consistently addressing its viewers as part of a national audience."⁴¹⁷ These format and aesthetic markers offer a clear view and insight into how the show's production imagined its relationship to its audience. Beyond this, the series' images of teens dancing and consuming music as a social and media activity would later prove influential

⁴¹⁶ *Bye Bye Birdie*.

⁴¹⁷ Matthew Delmont, "They'll Be Rockin' on Bandstand, in Philadelphia, PA," in *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 158.

for the expansion of MTV in the 1980s. Yet, it is important to note how these images resolved central contradictions in the national culture of the 1960s through how the show represented a segregated view of youth culture during its production years in Philadelphia. These images are not without their ideological charge, as they worked to displace racial tensions from national view within the context of broader debates about media access and representation that were happening in Philadelphia during the time of its production. Delmont writes:

The central problem facing *American Bandstand*'s producers was that their show's marketability depended on both the creative energies of Black performers and the erasure of black teenagers. Although *American Bandstand*'s music and dances were influenced by deejays Georgie Woods and Mitch Thomas and their black teenage fans, the image of youth culture *American Bandstand* presented to its national audience bore little resemblance to the interracial makeup of Philadelphia's rock and roll scene. As the television program that did the most to define the image of youth in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the exclusionary racial practices of *American Bandstand* marginalized Black teens from this imagined national youth culture.⁴¹⁸

As Delmont describes, this mutual privileging and marginalization of Black creative labor corresponds to shifts in the television marketplace, as shows with ethnic characters like *The Goldbergs* and *Life with Luigi* gave way to reinvestments in racially neutral white programming like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. At the same time as this trend, *American Bandstand* worked to center the show's representation of music fandom through cultural notions of white

⁴¹⁸ Delmont, "Introduction."

femininity. Images of white female fans worked, in this context, to secure these racial absences through their visible frenzy of investment in the white and often male artists typically represented on *American Bandstand*. Here, it is precisely the images of heterosexually-defined female fandom that are used to resolve crises of gendered discourses of art in rock music. At the same time, it is this representation of the girl fan's heterosexual desire that seeks to create emotional, physical, and affective investment in the white male performer's erasure of Black cultural forms. Such observations, of course, draw out the racial and gendered underpinnings of Elvis Presley's career as the source material for *Bye Bye Birdie*, as Elvis's negotiation of authentically 'Black' cultural styles goes unaddressed throughout the film. For this reason, the image of the screaming girl fan represents a moment in how new technological mediums like television worked to create models of fandom that were useful for gendering audience practices of consumption through the commercials offered on *American Bandstand*.

Madonna's Diva Celebrity and Feminist Voyeurism:

By 1985 - the year of *Desperately Seeking Susan*'s release - MTV was well into its conquest of American youth. Upon its release, MTV was described by its eventual CEO Bob Pittman as "much rougher, real, and more credible than TV."⁴¹⁹ The network famously premiered in August 1981 with The Buggles' music video for "Video Killed the Radio Star," a prescient song title that would reflect the influence of the network on the music industry in the decade following its launch. While academics and journalists frequently criticized the network for its postmodern emptiness, its programming was influential in the aesthetic style and cable revolutions of the 1980s and 1990s. Critiqued by Andrew Goodwin, John Fiske would famously assert of its programming

⁴¹⁹ Quoted in R. Serge Denisoff, *Inside MTV* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, Inc., 1988), 60.

that “the flashing crashing image-sounds ARE energy, speed, illusion, the hyperreal themselves: they simulate nothing, neither the reality nor the social machine.”⁴²⁰ For Goodwin, this critical tendency to reject MTV as an example of postmodern culture as ahistorical and substance-less reflected a lack of empiricism, particularly when noting the tension between MTV’s parodic sense of play on the one hand and its vague liberalism, social consciousness, and satirical perspective on the other. Yet, it is important to consider the network within the broader transformations and cultural reactions taking place at the end of the 20th-century as the fight for civil rights disappeared from the focus of national politics following political backlashes in the Nixon and Reagan presidencies transformed into clashes over questions of citizenship and media production. It is within this position that the televisual diva, situated yet more expansive than this medium, would absorb much of her resonance as a figure embodying cultural liberalism through associations with pro-sex feminism and forms of anti-racism, however authentic, that would impact new figurations of celebrity.

When housewife Roberta places her eyes up to the coin-operated binoculars in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), she finds the *desperate* woman she was longing to be (fig. 15).⁴²¹ The image of the effortlessly cool Susan (played by superstar Madonna Louise



Figure 15: Voyeurism and Madonna in *Desperately Seeking Susan*

Ciccone) smoking a cigarette in lace gloves and kissing her paramour greets the housewife’s gaze. In this scene, Susan Seidelman’s direction underscores Roberta’s act of looking upon Susan

⁴²⁰ John Fiske, “MTV: Post-Structural Post-Modern,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1986): 79. Quoted in Andrew Goodwin, “Fatal Distractions,” *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 52.

⁴²¹ *Desperately Seeking Susan*, DVD, Directed by Susan Seidelman (Los Angeles, CA: MGM, 1985).

through repeated cuts to a medium shot of the housewife's voyeurism. The peephole-effect of the binoculars echoes this emphasis as it recalls the visual iconography of romantic union that routinely marks the narrative climax of women's literary and filmic genres. Instead, this moment, occurring at about nearly the end of the first act, visualizes Roberta's voyeuristic desire, quasi-sexual and quasi-political, that places Susan at the heart of Roberta's desire to embrace her own independence from domestic life and begin expressing her own desires. This structure of looking relations, as I read it, draws on the intertextual range of associations around Madonna that characterized her as a new model of female celebrity. In doing so, *Susan* offers clues about the unsettling of sexual and racial hierarchies of postwar urban and suburban space that were afforded, partially, through the introduction of cable networks like MTV and its development of new commercial modes of address for diva celebrity.

Desperately Seeking Susan follows Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) as a New Jersey housewife who loses her identity after hitting her head while following the whereabouts of the bohemian New Yorker, Susan, whose romantic and sexual exploits are chronicled in the personal ads that the housewife reads. As significant a piece of direction as it is a historical artefact, *Susan* captures the various anxieties of the period around independent and sexually liberated women, domesticity, and the increasing creep of the American city and its values within national U.S. popular culture. Within the dominant representational themes in the film, Seidelman gathers the visual iconography of the period – particularly the re-urbanization of popular culture, advertising as a system of visual image-making made dominant by television – and explores the significance of this new female iconography as built around, in part, a rejection of domesticity and an embrace of the cross-racial and interclass mixing of the city. Recalling second-wave feminism's consideration of the housewife, Leora Barish's script owes debts to what Lisa Marie Hogeland has identified as "the

consciousness-raising (CR) novel” of the 1970s that was critical in “introducing feminist ideas to a broader reading public, and particularly in circulating feminist ideas beyond the small-group networks that made up radical feminism.”⁴²² These novels, Hogeland observes, employed “feminist-inflected devices as the housewife’s coming to consciousness and sexual awakening as political awakening,” elements that can, in part, describe Roberta’s exit out of the home and her quest for personal fulfillment, though the film avoids explicitly political conclusions to this journey.⁴²³ While lost in the city, Roberta finds herself on a pilgrimage that centers new forms of pleasure and work. Compellingly, the film’s ending, in contravention to most Hollywood fare, does not retain the romantic union of its central marriage. Thus, *Susan* communicates cultural commitments that were made popular by the influence of feminism that featured, through various literary devices, the exploration of female characters and their new independence, ranging, as Bonnie J. Dow observes in her study of prime-time television, from divorce, spousal death, or changes to a living location or job acquisition.⁴²⁴

The unsettling of domesticity as an organizing lens for women in suburban life comes to the fore in *Desperately Seeking Susan* through Roberta’s self-discovery of herself through both her voyeurism and vicarious experience of Susan’s life. This voyeurism plays out the possibility of Roberta’s self-expression, as her stalking gaze transgresses boundaries of urban and suburban space and its mapping of racial and sexual geographies. When Susan travels to the domestic enclaves of the suburbs, she brings not only the sexual heat of the city but brings, as well, drugs like marijuana that have been culturally perceived as ‘Black’ due to the expansion of the War on

⁴²² Lisa Marie Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and Women’s Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), ix.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴²⁴ For discussion of *Rhoda* and its TV contemporaries, see: Bonnie J. Dow, “Prime-Time Divorce: The Emerging Woman” of *One Day at a Time*,” in *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 59-85.

Drugs by the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, presidencies that were defined, in part, by their framing of urban crises through a *white* political imaginary. To this point, the value of respectability, historically racialized and classed through the ennoblement of ‘true womanhood’ and its values of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, play a pivotal role in demarcating the social geographies of the suburbs in its racial identity and set of expectations for women’s behavior. *Susan’s* plot features Roberta sacrificing her respectability by taking on the anonymity of the city, a circumstance that allows her to find new autonomy over her body, while such personal freedom brings connotations of sexual and racial deviancy from her husband Gary (Mark Blum) and sister-in-law Leslie (Laurie Metcalf). Roberta’s violation of this geography recalls the unsettling of key binaries in American public life of the 20th-century between urban/suburban space, Black/white racial identity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality that was similarly observed by the rise of MTV as a cable network in U.S. popular culture.

Desperately Seeking Susan represents urban New York as the site of otherness to the assumed social groups of the suburbs; and in doing so, the film casts urban space as the site of personal and sexual autonomy for (white) women like Roberta. For this reason, *Desperately Seeking Susan* represents a significant piece of culture within the longer histories of not only the representation of feminism on film but also the resettling of cultural geographies by middle-class and white imaginings of the city that would inform the late 20th-century diva commodity. In “Desperately Seeking Difference,” Jackie Stacey interrogates how the film re-codes the traditional looking relations of the classical Hollywood film. While the object of fascination of the film’s gaze remains a woman, Stacey observes, the subject of this gaze, in contrast, is Roberta whose desire propels the film’s narrative forward. Importantly, Stacey’s work pays attention to these “homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship,” recognizing how traditional accounts of pleasure

in dominant cinema are rooted in theories of sexual difference and the presumed absence of the female gaze.⁴²⁵ Less discussed in Stacey's critical reading is the iconography of the city and its cultural assumptions that the film depicts, even less about the racial tensions and relations that come to assert Susan's quest for self-fulfillment and freedom. Contending with the mundanity of the suburbs and its dance of respectability that is at the heart of its geographic and class privilege, *Susan* contributes significantly to the iconography of modern-day liberal feminism through its reclaiming of urban space as a related rejection of suburban domesticity. As importantly, the film illustrates earlier systems of media synergy and cross-promotion that would become a mainstay of youth culture by the 1990s. When Susan is seen in white lace gloves, eating cheese puffs, her attitude and look gesture towards the visual landscape of advertising material being developed through such cable networks as MTV, particularly through its splashy use of color and its signification of coolness through urban imagery. These types of images would directly be seen in the assortment of female-driven music videos that would mark the promotional address of young women viewers on the network. While this visual culture represents a series of visual and narrative experiments, the intense energy placed on the reclamation of urban space crystallizes in *Susan* through its reworking and re-imagining of this geography against the racial and sexual fears that informed the ideology of domesticity in the previous century, a period that Catherine Jurca has characterized as ennobling a suburban ideal that described "a model of white middle-class community as well as of private domestic life."⁴²⁶

An unexpected hit during its release, *Desperately Seeking Susan* became an industry sensation for its promise of a new wave of female talent for the film industry. Writing in the *Los*

⁴²⁵ Jackie Stacey, "Desperately Seeking Difference," *Screen*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1987): 48-61.

⁴²⁶ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

Angeles Times, Michael London acknowledged the difficulties of the film's female-driven team: "Sexual politics being what they are in Hollywood, a film with two women producers, a woman director, a woman writer and two female lead characters wasn't destined to be an easy sale."⁴²⁷ London's article surveyed the range of challenges on the film's project, from the difficulties of working with Warner Brothers before finding its home with Orion Pictures, largely through the efforts of Senior Vice President Barbara Boyle, and the arduous process of revising the script to add additional elements of romance, danger, and visual excitement to satisfy various types of audiences.⁴²⁸ *Susan*, in its press coverage, illustrates the mutual ways in which women working in Hollywood seem to be both celebrated and othered as a consequence of their gender identity that marks a particular experience of their labor in the industry. Seidelman, quoted in an article by the *Chicago Tribune*'s Jeff Silverman, stated: "I bristle a little bit when they say 'female director' or 'woman director' as though that's a way of saying, 'Well, she makes soft little sensitive movies that don't look very good and are technically sophisticated but they're gentle.'"⁴²⁹ Following its release, *Susan*, additionally, came to announce the distinction of Madonna as not only a new music and television talent but a film one as well. During the press rollout, producers Midge Sanford and Sarah Pillsbury took pains to qualify Madonna's casting: "We feel it's important to tell people that this is about two women and not a Madonna film...Forgetting who Madonna is, the Susan character represents freedom and living one's life in a liberated fashion, in contrast to the repressed Roberta (Rosanna Arquette)."⁴³⁰ At the same time, the singer's inclusion in the film reflected new archetypes of music stardom that drew influence from the bohemian downtown scene in New York

⁴²⁷ Michael London, "Strong-Willed Women Behind 'Seeking Susan,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1985, H1.

⁴²⁸ London, "Strong-Willed Women," *Times*.

⁴²⁹ Jeff Silverman, "Hottest Director in a Town Full of Directors Is – GASP – Female," *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1985: 5.

⁴³⁰ London, "Strong-Willed Women."

translated through the emerging popular culture of MTV. In doing so, *Susan* can be studied for how it mythologizes, incidentally, this model of female stardom as part of a larger field of post-feminist culture throughout the 1980s.

With debts to the intellectual preoccupations of the French New Wave and its generational questioning of ‘quality film,’ Seidelman’s work interrogates new models of female celebrity that were popularized by MTV’s arrival in 1981. This new female archetype, rooted in the revelry of girl culture and the more forceful reclaiming of women’s sexuality and pleasure, can be studied directly as it came to the fore in a film like *Desperately Seeking Susan*. New to the landscape of the early 1980s, the MTV female star arrived via rapid changes to the landscape of television posed by the introduction of cable networks that offered new forms of social representation for women through its youth culture address. As Lisa Lewis has observed, these videos appealed to a female audience by strategically appropriating the image of the street, dance as a symbolic mode of protest, and female camaraderie as an ideal.⁴³¹ At a time when cable channels were re-wiring the American consciousness, I argue that *Susan*’s interest in the relationship between Roberta and Susan was reflective of a new visual culture where the rules of female celebrity were being re-written, in part, by a rejection of domesticity and an embrace of the forms of boundary crossings, both sexual and racial, that had characterized earlier practices of urban “slumming.” Not un-related to this point, critics like Ellen Goodman in the *Chicago Tribune* positioned their readers’ attentions to Madonna as the epitome of the excesses of a more liberal sex culture, thus, encouraging the film’s reading as a narrative about a rebellious form of white womanhood that targeted patriarchal control over women’s sexuality.⁴³²

⁴³¹ Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV*, 117.

⁴³² Ellen Goodman, “Parents: Do Kids a Favor – Start Losing Your Cool,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1985: D2.

From its very beginning, *Desperately Seeking Susan* positions its viewers to understand the film's relationship to a version of suburban domesticity through its choice of locales and pastel color-schemes that recall the visual style of 1950s advertisements. Starting in the salon, beauticians are hard at work attending to the grooming demands of their clients. Roberta sits reading the personal ads to her sister-in-law Leslie. In a certain sense, the scene communicates the racial and class insularity of its customers, a space outside of the home where middle-class white women sought refuge and privacy from their domestic responsibilities through their capacity as consumers. Roberta is taken by the possible romance that she has just read in the personal ads: "Beautiful stranger. Red hair. Green jump suit. Walking dogs in Washington Square Park. Can't forget you. Give love a chance. Blackie."⁴³³ Leslie, more cynical and dismissive, pays Roberta little mind: "Oh, Roberta, please. He must be some kind of a pervert. ... Nobody named Blackie is sincere." Here, the film seems to communicate its awareness of sexual fears about women entering public space, dramatizing how racialized assumptions about crime and sexual misbehavior are essential underpinnings of these fears. Leslie states that she'll be giving Roberta something different for her birthday rather than the trim she wanted, telling the hairdresser to give her sister-in-law "nothing weird," highlighting the concern over the personality of her cut being unflattering or expressing too much individuality. The salon worker gets the point: "her husband will love it," thus emphasizing the innate malaise of Roberta by the physical demands of middle-class respectability on her body and self-image.⁴³⁴

Here, *Susan* begins to narrate muted questions of feminism by emphasizing what Betty Friedan diagnosed in 1963 as "the problem that has no name" to refer to the lack of personal

⁴³³ *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

fulfillment experienced by housewives in the post-war moment.⁴³⁵ Writing in an early classic of second-wave feminism, Friedan highlights the paradoxical nature of women's containment within the suburban domestic sphere, "where most hours of the day there are virtually no men at all," as is featured in *Susan* through Gary's neglect of his wife through intimated affairs and the business demands of his hot tub empire.⁴³⁶ With obvious problems in its framing, *The Feminine Mystique* re-locates this absence of intimacy in marital relations in the consumer activities of the housewife, as advertisers seek to call attention to women's sexual identities in the service of selling products or the search for status through the imitation of desirability that marks, partially, the consumerist embrace of celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor. These themes directly crystallize in the looking relations demonstrated in *Susan*. Moving from Roberta's voyeuristic imaginings of the personal ads, the film's next scene introduces its titular subject as a mirror to the type of housewife and her discontents theorized by second-wave feminists like Friedan. Susan's introduction seizes on her erotic potential as one aspect of her desirability and visual status. Seidelman's first shot of Susan stresses her material excess with room service and a deck of cards scattered all around her, as she takes a photo of herself while Foreigner's "Urgent" (1981) plays in the background. Susan, unlike Roberta, is narratively marked by her ease with her image as a sexual subject, as she takes a polaroid of herself wearing an array of beaded necklaces that flow down into her cleavage, calling attention to the sartorial vogue of 1980s MTV entertainers like Cyndi Lauper and, yes, Madonna herself.

Crucially, this scene works to position the Susan character as the image of what Kathleen Rowe Karlyn has termed the "unruly girl," whose unruliness is "implicitly feminist because it

⁴³⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 57-79.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*, 378.

destabilizes patriarchal norms, although that connection may not be overtly acknowledged.”⁴³⁷ Through ideas of unruliness, Roberta’s relationship to Susan is specifically privileged as part of a network of looking relations that center her potential freedom by reconfiguring the imagination of urban space. As Susan can barely find a place to stay, Roberta visits a house-party with her sister-in-law, where they both work to identify good romantic matches and marriages. In this scene, Leslie privileges the earning power of men as a key aspect of their social interactions, asking if the gentlemen next to Gary is a plastic surgeon but settles her disappointment when learning that he is, in fact, *only* a dentist. A privileged setting, this house party is a long way from the type of urban downtown life and its sexual liberalism observed in Susan’s introduction. Meaningfully, the boundaries of suburban space are violated when a local news broadcast introduces the stolen Nefertiti earrings as a background foil to the Roberta and Susan’s personality swap, recalling the ways in which television news played a defining role in violating these racial boundaries of national geography throughout the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the broadcasts of urban problems that marked the 1980s. Roberta and the other guests watch the airing of Gary’s commercial for his hot-tub empire. In the commercial, evidence of Gary’s philandering behavior appears, as a group of buxom blondes in the ad pull him into the hot tub flirtatiously. Uninterested, Roberta looks out the window as her reflection juxtaposes against the last line of Gary’s commercial: “All your fantasies can come true.”⁴³⁸ The crowd cheers as Roberta seeks to get a little more air outside. The audience watches her gaze into the distance as she steps out of the building. A music interlude starts to play as a metropolitan bus announcing “New York City” enters the frame and Susan is seen exiting in a hat and pair of sunglasses, an image reflective of

⁴³⁷ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism On Screen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 11.

⁴³⁸ *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

her sartorial mystery and allure that will capture Roberta's intrigue. In doing so, *Desperately Seeking Susan* works to position its titular subject as the site of an imaginative potential for Roberta's desires and the increasing centrality of the city within this network of meanings.

While Madonna's celebrity by the end of the 1980s certainly communicated such unruliness, this circumstance was not immediately clear during her casting. It is important to note, further, that the performer's addition to the film can only retrospectively be viewed as an obvious recipe for success. *Desperately Seeking Susan* was a risky project, as it marked the then-32-year-old Seidelman's move from the independent *Smithereens* (1982) with an \$80,000 budget to one of about \$5 million. In the production's beginning, film executives gravitated towards more established film and celebrity talent, not necessarily recognizing the potential of MTV and its youth audience at first, as Cher, Goldie Hawn, and Diane Keaton were considered for the role of Roberta Glass. In fact, Rosanna Arquette was considered the star of the film at the end of its casting for her recent work with John Sayles on *Baby It's You* (1983). Seidelman herself conceded that Arquette's rising celebrity is one of the main reasons that Orion had given the project the greenlight.⁴³⁹ Regarding the titular Susan, Seidelman has recounted that Orion had recommended initially what she termed "a studio head's idea of a perfect blonde," which had contrasted her vision of Susan as a "spicy blonde" who "floats through the funkiness in which she lives as if she were a princess."⁴⁴⁰ Though the biggest star of the MTV era, Madonna's fame, at the time, was largely confined to a limited subset of America's youth from MTV videos like "Holiday" (1983) and "Borderline" (1984), a circumstance that saw some of the children of Orion executives petitioning for Madonna to earn the role. Thus, Madonna's casting, further, illustrates critical shifts

⁴³⁹ Jeff Silverman, "Hottest Director in a Town Full of Directors Is – GASP – Female," *Chicago Tribune*.

⁴⁴⁰ Janet Maslin, "At the Movies," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1985: C.4.

in generational frameworks of celebrity that began with the pivot to youth culture by Hollywood and the music industry earlier in the century and culminated in MTV throughout the 1980s.

In some senses, *Susan* mythologizes the new looking relations of modern female celebrity by emphasizing the voyeurism of Madonna's star text for young woman as a quasi-political exploration of their selves. In this view, I argue that *Susan* has substantively served to inform the mythology of Madonna, just as the singer came to imbue elements of the film with a stronger feminist reading through her celebrity's explicit rejection of patriarchal norms by re-centering questions of pleasure and professional fulfillment in her star-text. Part of the film's lore has been the film's function as an advertisement for Madonna's stardom by the virtue of her attitude and look at a time when her career was exploding. These visual and performance-based aspects of her stardom reflected the demands of a new archetype of celebrity on MTV. In fact, at the start of their careers, these performers were considered interchangeable by some audiences. When production began in the fall of 1984, it was rumored that bystanders of the filming would regularly mistake Madonna for Cyndi Lauper, another video music star who had played with traditional performances of girlhood in her promotional videos. Partly, Lauper's appeal was generated out of an embrace of her sartorial play in using New Wave fashion for her music videos. Reflecting New Wave's reveling in commercialism and eclecticism, Melissa Sones, in the *Chicago Tribune*, chronicled the new prosperity of Screaming Mimi's, an antique clothing boutique in Manhattan where Lauper had once worked as a sales clerk.⁴⁴¹ The store's co-owners Biff Chandler and Laura Wills had described how Lauper's rise in fame had created a tourist attraction out of their boutique. Chandler and Wills acknowledged that it was, perhaps, not the specificity of the clothes but her fashion as an expression of her bold individuality, describing Lauper's ability to turn a

⁴⁴¹ Melissa Sones, "Fans Scream for Lauper's Clothes Source," *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1985: 4.

conservative dress into “something totally unexpected” by the addition of “three dozen strands of incredible colored pearls.”⁴⁴² These types of stories speaks to the paradoxical yet no less significant counter-cultural edge of performers like Lauper and Madonna whose sartorial style became viewed as vehicles for a greater expression of self-individuality.

Moreover, *Desperately Seeking Susan* sought to expand on these circumstances by exploiting opportunities for fan marketing and merchandising. Halfway through *Susan*’s shooting, *Like A Virgin* (1984) was released by Sire Records and transformed Madonna into a video superstar, a circumstance that impacted the film considerably. In its release, Orion sought to position *Susan* within the context of MTV and its relationship to a new form of the youth audience. Seidelman herself has acknowledged that Orion attempted to position *Susan* in relation to the success of Prince’s *Purple Rain* (1984). Postproduction, in fact, had been rushed, reflecting the studio’s desire for a March opening, due to inflated industry speculation that Madonna’s career might be over by the time of its release.⁴⁴³ In its last days of filming, the set contended with the issue of Madonna’s fame and its related frenzy, creating clear tensions that would lead to Rosanna Arquette expressing that she wouldn’t have made the film if she had foreseen her co-star’s meteoric rise.⁴⁴⁴ Producer Sarah Pillsbury, a UCLA film school graduate later known for *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *River’s Edge* (1986), would recall the difficulty of the studio’s team in understanding the market for the film during its distribution meetings. Credited, however, was the success of the marketing team, Blaise Noto in particular, who pushed for the making of lace gloves and rubber bracelets to help promote the film, a recognition of how fashion and marketing could

⁴⁴²Melissa Sones, “Fans Scream for Lauper’s Clothes Source,” 4.

⁴⁴³ “‘Desperately Seeking Susan’ Turns 30: An Oral History of the Downtown Classic,” *Yahoo! News*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/desperately-seeking-susan-turns-30-an-oral-114699999372.html>.

⁴⁴⁴ Lindsey Gruson, “‘Susan’ Draws Spirit from the Sidewalks of New York,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 1985.

be synthesized for young consumers.⁴⁴⁵ Madonna, seeing opportunities for cross-promotion, had brokered a deal with the producers to include her single “Into the Groove” as part of the film, even leading to the release of an official music video edited from the film’s footage. Indeed, as the film’s marketing poster included an image of Madonna and Arquette hanging together in matching pyramid jackets, the Santo Loquasto design came to be sold as a mass-market version to capitalize on and promote the film’s success. Additionally, licensing deals were struck with Bakers & Leeds for the studded boots that Susan finds in the vintage store. These examples illustrate the ways in which the release of *Susan* drew on the new forms of MTV stardom that had made Madonna into a household name as favorable conditions for its own success.

Understanding the history of female domesticity is to understand the ways that urban and suburban space have become situated through the language of race and gender. To this point, the cult of domesticity, which found its popularity in the 19th-century through women’s treatises and home magazines, reflected the larger transition of the U.S. as an agrarian society into an industrialized center of the world. In *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), Catharine Beecher argued for the standardization of domestic arts and practices as a science to be taught to young woman.⁴⁴⁶ Beecher’s work fit into a landscape of an emerging domestic ideology that sought to elevate women’s personal autonomy by privileging their moral authority over the home.⁴⁴⁷ Within this ideological system, the late 19th-century featured a growing emphasis on the suburban home as a haven from urban centers, afforded by the new network of rails that made such commutes possible. These values were communicated through the increasing ornateness of the suburban home in advertisements that sought to communicate a moral and spiritual remove from the growing

⁴⁴⁵ “‘Desperately Seeking Susan’ Turns 30: An Oral History of the Downtown Classic,” *Yahoo! News*.

⁴⁴⁶ Catherine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York, NY: Harper & Bros, 1849), 5-6.

⁴⁴⁷ For a greater discussion of domesticity as what historians have called “the cult of true womanhood,” see: Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

labor unrest in the nation's cities. While cities gave middle-class women access to department stores, supplemental domestic labor, and other luxuries, the influx of European immigrants and Black Southerners started to change the imagination of the American city over, in part, white fears of cultural and political impotency, long-running tropes in the history of white political backlash. As Lynn Spiegel has observed, the turn of 20th-century United States saw the rise of ethnocentrism and resistance to political activism that contributed to the ideological merger between suburbia and domestic bliss.⁴⁴⁸ In this way, the context of nineteenth-century industrialization ennobled the suburban home as a fixture of a new middle-class consciousness, but it did so, as well, by placing domestic life at the center of the moral retreat from the city, and thus illustrating the role of racial, social, and cultural hierarchies in mapping national geographies. Crucially, it is important to recognize how this return to the city in national culture of the 1980s, particularly for music, helped re-stage many of the cultural debates that had first led to the popularization of the phonograph by exploiting the cultural hegemony of opera within ideologies of civilization and personal cultivation, a genre used to enshrine a mode of music production, heavily classed, against the sounds of music as a cheap urban amusement within the city.

The signification of celebrity within these debates in the context of the 1980s followed trends for urban sophistication and culture that had dominated the 1920s and 1930s before conditions of censorship in Hollywood restricted access to these forms of culture in the nation's movie theaters. As Chad Heap has described, "postwar suburbanization initially replicated many of the class and racial divisions that characterized turn-of-the-century cities. ... Because a host of racially discriminatory practices prevented nearly all blacks from gaining access to suburban

⁴⁴⁸ Spiegel, *Make Room for TV*, 17.

housing, residency in postwar suburbia became an undeniable marker of whiteness.”⁴⁴⁹ As marriage rates rose sharply following WWII, American society experienced a revitalization of its suburban ideals, particularly as it came to articulate the new desire and dreams of postwar prosperity. These cultural ideals were structural at the legislative level, as they were made possible by The Housing Act of 1949, which created financial incentives for the building of single-family homes. The suburbs, thus, were re-conceived as an anchor of new forms of economic prosperity and relied on the maintenance of racially segregated communities. As white families were able to buy into manufactured suburbs like Levittown, NY, John A. Powell has, among others, studied the role of the Federal Housing Administration “in racializing metropolitan space and home ownership” and through the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) deemed “ethnically diverse central city neighborhoods...too risky for investment.”⁴⁵⁰ Thus, the postwar suburbs had been marked not only by the re-emergence of domesticity in the shifts undergoing media consumption with the rise of television but that this re-enshrinement of the home worked to conceal the racial exclusiveness of the American domestic ideal.⁴⁵¹ Through these zoning practices, forms of racial segregation between urban and suburban space were codified into law, boundaries that were frequently challenged and re-imagined in the visual culture of MTV and its female stars that has explanatory relevance for the urban imagination featured in *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

⁴⁴⁹ Heap, *Slumming*, 278.

⁴⁵⁰ John A. Powell, “How Government Tax and Housing Policies Have Racially Segregated America,” *Taxing America*, eds. Karen B. Brown and Mary Louise Fellows (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 90-91.

⁴⁵¹ See: Megan Behrent, “Suburban Captivity Narratives: Feminism, Domesticity, and the Liberation of the American Housewife,” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 247-286.

When surveying the archetype of female celebrity on MTV, a recurring feature of their visual work is the performance of a symbolic takeover of urban space and the challenging of gendered hierarchies in their questioning of patriarchal sex roles. As Lisa A. Lewis has observed,

“female address emerged on MTV in the form of female-musician videos designed to speak to and resonate with female cultural experiences of adolescence and gender.”⁴⁵² Lewis’s work privileges four female musicians



in particular – Tina Turner, Pat Benatar, Cyndi Lauper, and, yes, Madonna – for

Figure 16: Tina Turner Returning the Camera Gaze in “What’s Love Got To Do With It”

the ways that they re-signified “the street” through their mid-1980s video work, and thus, challenged the type of sexual fears and anxieties over white middle-class women’s sexuality as it came to be mapped onto the geographies of urban space from the late 19th-century. In “What’s Love Got To Do With It” (1984), Tina Turner offers an anthem to physical, not emotional congregation, with men and returns the sexual gazes of desiring men in public space (fig. 16).⁴⁵³

In “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” (1983), Lauper compares the generational freedoms of her on-screen persona and her mother (played by real-life mother, Catrine Lauper) under the patriarchal authority of her controlling father. Contrasting with her mother’s easy-listening soundscape, Lauper’s entrance masquerades the new electronic sound as a long run of notes matches her body’s quick fluttering across the red brick of New York’s city streets, a masquerade of the visual editing

⁴⁵² Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, 109.

⁴⁵³ Accessed via “Tina Turner - What's Love Got to Do with It [HD REMASTERED],” YouTube Video, 3:46, Posed by “Tina Turner Official,” March 13, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGpFcHTxjZs>.

techniques that would define promotional videos on MTV. Lisa Lewis argues that in Lauper's single "'fun' is articulated as an expansive and politicized concept for girls...visualized both in terms of doing what boys do—getting out of the house (and housework) and onto the street—and in terms of the kinds of activities and relationship girls devise in their attempts to create a contemporary order of female fun."⁴⁵⁴ In the video,



Figure 17: The Patriarchal Gaze in "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"

the latent fears of young girls and their own sexual autonomy is visualized in patriarchal terms, as the on-screen father (played by Lou Albano) is seen finger-wagging at his daughter. This image of the stern father as a detriment to the daughter's emotional well-being is a theme echoed in Benatar's "Love Is a Battlefield" (1983). Here, Lauper's rebellion, indeed, is implicitly sexual, but it is rooted in ideas about bodily autonomy and the routine forms of surveillance that mark gender as a lived experience. To this point, the video ends with a street parade entering Lauper's domestic bedroom, a counterpoint to the ways in which this space functions according to patriarchal fears of the daughter's loss of innocence, phrased in the video through her father's comical looking through the keyhole of her bedroom door to find writhing, dancing bodies (fig. 17).⁴⁵⁵ Here, Lauper's video work stresses the critique of patriarchal norms and practices that restrict the bodily autonomy and spatial mobility of young women, advocating for the quasi-political claim of young women's desires for fun.

⁴⁵⁴ Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV*, 117.

⁴⁵⁵ Accessed via "Cyndi Lauper - Girls Just Want To Have Fun (Official Video)," YouTube Video, 4:26, Posed by "Cyndi Lauper," October 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIb6AZdTr-A>.

These themes are ones that would re-emerge in Lauper's visual work most particularly in the music video for "She Bop" (1984), a single whose lyrical themes of self-pleasuring came under fire from Tipper Gore and Susan Bakker's Parents' Music Resource Center, an organization later discussed for its centrality in national



Figure 18: Pleasure and Pornography in "She-Bop" (1984)

attempts to politicize popular music lyrics and seek moral control over the nation's marketplace.⁴⁵⁶ In "She Bop," Lauper more explicitly alludes and winks to this persona aimed at discomforting the sexual boundaries placed on young women and their self-expression by taking up the subject of female masturbation. In Lauper's music video, pleasure becomes one way to establish individuality in opposition to the conformity of a mass consumer culture. At its start, lines of teenagers dressed in all white are marching in a single-file line at the establishment "Burger Klone," a restaurant that proudly proclaims that "over 20 billion sold out," a reference to the countercultural edge and anxieties that have long marked the development of youth culture. Situated against nodding teen automatons, Lauper redeploys her own sexuality in the privacy of a car, another libidinal center of teen sexuality and patriarchal fears of a daughter's loss of sexual innocence. The car, steaming inside, highlights the shadows of Lauper's writhing legs against the glass. Presumed to be sharing the vehicle with another man, Lauper, instead, is revealed to be reading *Beefcake*, a magazine well-studied for its relationship to gay commercial and pornographic subcultures. This magazine points to the ways in which Lauper's persona phrases gender deviance

⁴⁵⁶ See: Claude Chastagner, "The Parents' Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship," *Popular Music*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1999): 179-192.

through sexual terms by a parodic taking on of patriarchal tropes about young women and their sexuality (fig. 18).⁴⁵⁷⁴⁵⁸ As the video progresses, the performer is chased by cartoon images of domestic women and men adorned in military-grade helmets with pink curlers glued upon them. These images serve as metaphors for how domesticity and its envisioning of female chastity and submission became visualized in MTV videos as its own type of militancy against young women. Through these videos, the implicit and explicit re-imagining of young women's sexual expressivity and laying claim to the agency of their bodies, precisely through the centering of white female musicianship *against* the traditional gendering of women's bodies as fans and consumers of popular music.

At the same time, Madonna's "Borderline" (1984) offers another example how the new wave of female music video artists targeted the tropes of domesticity that had defined Victorian ideologies of young womanhood. If Lauper's "She Bop" sought to phrase these issues in terms of a parodic taking on of patriarchal figures, Madonna's visual iconography seemed more attentive to the boundaries of women, sexuality, and the forms of performance latent to new modes of visual stardom. Lisa Lewis has argued that "Borderline" raises "questions about how the code of prostitution is usually socially elaborated and about how representations of females on the street might be re-visioned."⁴⁵⁹ In the first part of the video, Madonna is seen being discovered on the street, a theme that is central to the publicity language of stardom, as she comes to model for a photographer. The video itself seems to play with ideas about high-brow and low-brow through its use of black and white photography to depict her modeling adventures. Elsewhere, Madonna

⁴⁵⁷ See: David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁴⁵⁸ Accessed via "Cyndi Lauper - She Bop (Official HD Video)," YouTube Video, 4:37, Posed by "Cyndi Lauper," October 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFq4E9XTueY>.

⁴⁵⁹ Lisa A. Lewis, "Female Address on Music Television: Being Discovered," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 35 (April 1990): 2-15.

carries out her own love affair in the street that dovetails with older notions of the city as a geography of ethnic enclaves. Such a video works to think of not only the ways that the usage of women's appearances and sexuality is foundational to a new system of promotional videos but how these images, also, evoked and intervened in older codes of decorum about women, their sexuality, and urban space. These music videos, thus, depict an image of women's culture that worked to redefine the cultural construction of racialized, urban space as fundamental to intervening in the cultural hierarchies and geographies that worked to constrain women's sexuality. Of course, this recognition does not sidestep the obvious ways in which such visual media also work to create and confirm new codes of decorum for women and the ways in which women's sexuality remains a core commodified element of capitalist culture, but it *does*, however, recognize the terms of a middle-class youth culture in the 1980s that aimed to intervene within longer histories of gender, space, and sexuality that can be observed as crystallizing in such films as Madonna's film debut in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985).

As female agency is juxtaposed against suburban domesticity in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the film's narrative thematizes this relationship through the intimacy of the celebrity persona. Brandished for the film by the singular individuality of Madonna, the character Susan comes to operate as both a reflection and commentary on new models of female music stardom and its gendered address. MTV, like other cable networks of its day, split and re-situated understandings of television's mass media address; in doing so, such cable networks offered new opportunities for not only branded promotional content for artists but also platforms for 'activist' models of gender performance in popular culture, as new stars like Cyndi Lauper and Madonna created a visual body of work that explicitly thematized a desire for greater female agency. This desire, and its metaphors of urban space, come to inform *Desperately Seeking Susan* and its

working through of Roberta's "problem that has no name." These moments, moreover, are interesting for the way that they point to the racial and gendered anxieties of urban space, as it came to be defined through issues of domesticity in the late 19th-century. These anxieties, about the racial and sexual mixing of the city, would come to define some of the very attitudes that would inform the various "white flights" of the 1950s and 1960s within the context of desegregation via *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). By satirizing old forms of traditionalism figured by suburban domesticity, *Susan* illustrates a form of media-situated politics that interrogates the very real issue of pleasure and sexual fulfillment for women through its screwball sendup of characters like Gary and Leslie that also speaks to the reconfiguring of urban space in the postwar period.

Related to the giving up of her domestic respectability, *Susan*'s narrative constitutes a fight over Roberta's identity that marks a break in the presumption of her sexual innocence by her family members, as her disappearance and its association to a crime story comes to be defined through ideas about urban difference. As they worry about Roberta's jailing, Leslie frets about the example of the housewife who would engage in sex-work in the morning before going shopping in the afternoon and was able to hide these aspects of her day from her husband for years, a story reminiscent of Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). With a sense of paternalism about Roberta's sexuality, Gary responds, "That's impossible. She doesn't even like sex that much." Pointing to the ways that fears of Roberta's sexuality contribute to a sense of the husband's impotency, Leslie recalls reading that "4 out of 5 prostitutes are lesbians," a remark that mimics sociological language with the classist attitudes of the 1980s.⁴⁶⁰ Here, a version of racial and sexual difference are implicitly raised as the threats of Roberta's newfound sense of self, and it is directly this skewering of suburban sexual traditionalism that works to situate the reception of

⁴⁶⁰ *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

the former housewife's emancipation from her husband. At the same time, Roberta's newfound freedom is constituted by appeals to these cultural Others as a way of situating her own ability to exist outside dominant assumptions of women and their sexuality.

Importantly, *Desperately Seeking Susan* highlights how celebrity and its relationship to an imagined sexual agency functions as a compelling form of a cultural feminism through its associations with voyeurism. In the film's climactic scene between Roberta and Gary, the wife pointedly asks her husband why it is that he wants her to come home, seeking to clarify whether their relationship is only out of societal obligation. After Gary mocks her new clothes as ridiculous, Roberta pleads, "Look at me, Gary. Look at me"; and here, one of the film's most explicit assertions of female subjectivity is most directly stated. She declares: "I'm not coming home with you." Moments later, Roberta saves Susan from her assailant in the back alley, taking up the mantle as the film's hero in a reversal of the gendered expectations of melodramas set by early film narratives. Moreover, *Susan* intervenes in this tradition of sexuality in film by alluding to her sexual fulfillment at the film's end in relation to the imagery of Hollywood genre-filmmaking. Tucked away in a projection booth, Roberta meets her lover Dez (Aidan Quinn) this time with her own name, a mark of her being more authentic and real in their relationship. They kiss as the film stock in the projector starts to burn. Acknowledging the heat of their romance, the camera cuts away to Susan in the audience, as "Into the Groove," Madonna's promotional single, begins to play. The last image is of the headline, "What A Pair," in a copy of the *Mirror*, pointing to another way in which Roberta's voyeurism of Susan is celebrated by the film's conclusion. In doing so, *Susan* offers an intriguing commentary on both the foundations of voyeurism on MTV and the fantasies of empowerment it engendered for women and girls stuck in certain aspects of

patriarchal oppression, a circumstance made more obvious by the post-second wave context of the film and its use of Madonna as representative of a new kind of womanhood.

While Lynn Stoever-Ackerman has argued that rock's rise created its own set of racialized erasures (and echoed in MTV's initial trepidation around Black artists), it is also important to note how the development of visualized rock music through MTV's demographic address created the conditions for an intense re-visualization of women's onscreen presentation and their roles through such urban and relatedly racial metaphors.⁴⁶¹ *Desperately Seeking Susan* visualizes these absences and transforms its spatial operation in the city as the conditions for women's desire and more expressive agency. Here, the imitative structure of Roberta and Susan's relationship works to thematize the politics of looking and the politics of music celebrity as a system of meaning-making produced out of participation within a national media-based consumer culture. Many of these issues are themselves not specific to *Desperately Seeking Susan* but can be explicitly studied here as a representative text of the new forms of branding and synergy that MTV would make possible, as crossover stardom became a key way to meet the new exigencies of an independent film system. Moreover, the valuation placed on female stardom as illustrative moments of shifting ideas about women's agency has a long history, as it can be studied through the figures of "starstruck girls" who sought to move to urban centers to pursue their dreams of being seen by the entertainment industry, a circumstance that, if anything, certainly describes the origins and mythology of Madonna's career in her transition from Michigan to the big city. While Madonna's sexual liberalism often coded the ways that certain elements of second wave feminism influenced the rise

⁴⁶¹ See: Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Reproducing U.S. Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism, and the Tape Recorder," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (September 2011): 781-806.

of youth culture in the 1980s, debates about female sexual objectification often sought to position this reclamation of sexuality within existing gendered and racial fault lines.

Censorship and “Pornography” in Popular Music:

While popular depictions of MTV’s female celebrity visualized reclamations of the female body against notions of traditional gender ideologies of domesticity, concerns over the sexual objectification of women would become a national issue within television’s representation of culture war issues. Concerns over the sexual objectification of women arose from the Parents’ Music Resource Center’s attack on rock music. Founded by Tipper Gore and Susan Baker, the organization’s origin story followed Gore’s reaction to Prince’s “Darling Nikki” (1984) reference to female masturbation.⁴⁶² Baker had taken issue with Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” (1984) after her young daughter asked about the meaning of the song’s title.⁴⁶³ Positioned within a lineage of attempts to regulate obscenity,⁴⁶⁴ PMRC developed an array of clever tactics to reform the music marketplace. Among these acts was to politicize the economic activity of artists through a blacklist known as “The Filthy Fifteen.” The list targeted what the PMRC viewed as obscene representations of sexuality in the case of Prince’s “Darling Nikki,” Judas Priest’s “Eat Me Alive,” AC/DC’s “Let Me Put My Love Into You,” W.A.S.P’s “Animal (Fuck Like a Beast),” violence in the case of Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It” and Mötley Crüe’s “Bastard,” or declarations of female sexuality in the case of Vanity’s “Strap on Robbie Baby,” Madonna’s “Dress You Up,” and Cyndi Lauper’s “She-Bop.”⁴⁶⁵ Notably, PMRC’s concern had yet to focus

⁴⁶² Tom Roston, “Mr. Zappa Goes to Washington,” *Spin*, September 19, 1985, pp. 42-46, 114.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Margaret Blanchard has identified Anthony Comstock’s New York Society for the Suppression of Vice as one of the first national censorship campaigns in the U.S. See: Margaret A. Blanchard, “The American Urge to Censor: Freedom of Expression Versus the Desire to Sanitize Society--From Anthony Comstock to 2 Live Crew,” *William and Mary Law Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring 1992): 744-760.

⁴⁶⁵ Kory Grow, “PMRC’s ‘Filthy 15’: Where Are They Now?” *Rolling Stone*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/pmrcs-filthy-15-where-are-they-now-60601>.

on rap lyrics within the context of their pressure campaign. Additionally, they targeted the music industry's trade organization, the Recording Industry of America Association ("RIAA"), through a letter-writing campaign to advocate for a music rating system. Their strategy aimed to pressure the industry to take control of its own self-regulation. This new ratings system, they hoped, would be similar in scope to Hollywood reform efforts replacing the Production Code in the 1960s. Claude Chastagner has read PMRC's goals as de-facto censorship for how it would have re-oriented music production.⁴⁶⁶ Rejecting such claims, Gore positioned her media activism around the language of the marketplace, hoping to restore individual choice and control, particularly of parents, against the music industry's "cheap industrial ingredient" of violent and sexual images.⁴⁶⁷

Critically, the public pressure campaign reflected new conditions of television journalism that sensationalized debates about the politics of culture. Hoping to attract this media attention, PMRC organized a congressional hearing on music labeling in 1985. During these proceedings, music artists issued scathing critiques of the hearing as a violation of their First Amendment rights. Reading its text into the record, Frank Zappa argued the proposal was "an ill-conceived piece of nonsense which fails to deliver any real benefits to children" and "infringes the civil liberties of people who are not children."⁴⁶⁸ Zappa would use this public moment in his following album, *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention* (1985), which featured the song "Porn Wars" (1985) that used audio clips from the hearing. While RIAA agreed to a Parental Advisory Sticker in 1985 (known colloquially as the "Tipper Sticker"), Zappa and Gore would make the rounds on broadcast and cable television. During these debates, Zappa would appear on CNN's *Crossfire*

⁴⁶⁶ Claude Chastagner, "The Parents' Music Resource Center," 179.

⁴⁶⁷ Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 12-13.

⁴⁶⁸ U.S. Senate, Record Labeling: Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, Ninety-ninth Congress, First Session on Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records, September 19, 1985. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

(1982-2014) and ABC's *Nightline* (1980-Present) to publicize his objections. Reflecting what Nancy Baym has described as the "relational labor," these television appearances, echoing Gore's similar strategy, represented how debates over culture came to be inscribed within TV journalism of the 1980s.⁴⁶⁹ More than this, however, these debates frequently illustrated the ways in which the media industries commodified acts of dissent within this new context of cable television.

Married to future Vice President Al Gore, Tipper's public messaging drew influence from the political moralism typically associated with the religious right. In *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (1987), Gore describes society's dilemma to preserve personal and family values within the changing media conditions of the 1980s.⁴⁷⁰ This book featured discursive similarities between its pro-family rhetoric and white grievance politics, illustrating how this policing of culture would transform from a focus on rock music's misogyny, what Gore would decry as "porn rock," to the cultural expression of rap by Black artists. Echoing themes of taking back control of the country – a hallmark of the lingua franca of American white racial activism – Gore would write, "I want this book to be a call to arms for American parents. I want to offer them the very real hope that we can assert some control over the cultural environment in which our children are raised."⁴⁷¹ Gore's rhetoric, resembling that of the earlier Payne Fund Studies, would appeal to maternal rhetoric about early child psychology and the predatory effects of obscene media. Situated within a decade in which racial anxieties about Black women's excessive sexuality was used to attack social programs, Gore's PMRC activism represented, in some senses, how this maternalism became situated within contemporary racial debates. At the hearing, Susan Baker

⁴⁶⁹ Nancy Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 18.

⁴⁷⁰ Gore, *Raising PG Kids*, 12.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid*, 13.

would raise the specter of teen pregnancy explicitly, embodying the swirling mix of race, gender, class, and sexuality politics that dominated the era:

Some say there is no cause for concern. We believe there is. ... The Noedecker Report states that in the United States of America we have the highest teen pregnancy rate of any developed country: 96 out of 1,000 teenage girls become pregnant. Rape is up 7 percent in the latest statistics....⁴⁷²

Appearing to collapse distinctions between teen pregnancy and rape, Gore's book would echo this concern, raising traditional orientations of maternal politics that base themselves around traditional gender ideologies, warning that the growth of divorce and teen pregnancy had produced a situation in which "By 1980, women headed 56 percent of poor families with children."⁴⁷³ Even as political rhetoric of the 1980s continued half-convincing traditions of colorblind discussions of race, such rhetoric about the situation of poor, unwed mothers seemed to exemplify the ways in which debates over rap lyrics came increasingly to serve as a proxy for gendered discussions of urban social problems.⁴⁷⁴

Embodying this re-orientation of urban and suburban space, MTV's popularity with suburban youth provided networks of promotion that fueled the growth of rap music as a segment of the music industry. This circumstance reflects what Tricia Rose has described as rap's discovery by the cultural industries following the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979) recognition on the Billboard Charts.⁴⁷⁵ The growth in industry investment in hip-hop also followed the

⁴⁷² U.S. Senate, Record Labeling: Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

⁴⁷³ Gore, *Raising PG Kids*, 44.

⁴⁷⁴ Progressive-era maternal activism could be observed in connection with birth control debates. Within these framings, activists like Margaret Sanger routinely found recourse to racialized and classed figures of motherhood to argue for disseminating sexual health information. See: Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York, NY: Brentano's Publishers, 1922).

⁴⁷⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 3.

emergence of *Yo! MTV Raps* as a competitive music program against Black Entertainment Television's *Rap City* (1989-2008).⁴⁷⁶ Aired music videos included 2 Live Crew's "Me So Horny" (1989), in which the group attempted to parody sexual myths of Black men by showing Campbell repeatedly calling women on an oversized red phone. Echoed in the song's lyrics, 2 Live Crew's performance of Black male sexuality, what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would refer to as "signifying," "playing the dozens," or "sexual carnivalesque,"⁴⁷⁷ complicates the longer cultural histories of race on MTV. Whereas in the first part of the decade, MTV's navigation of a rock music audience centered an address to white teen consumer culture dating back to at least the 1950s, a form of culture that frequently borrowed, segregated, and erased the presence of Black artists in the early years of *American Bandstand* (1952-1989).⁴⁷⁸ In the second part of the decade, its mediation of a national platform for youth culture troubled racial geographies of urban and suburban space. Within the decade, Run-DMC and Public Enemy would become among the first superstar rap groups, thereby bringing aspects of Black urban experience into more white suburban enclaves. So widespread was this moment for the genre, 1989 would see the development of the Grammy Award for Best Rap Performance and MTV's recognition of the Best Rap Video at the VMAs. These inaugural awards would both go to DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince (the stage persona of Will Smith) for "Parents Just Don't Understand" (1988). Smith, quoted in journalist Glenn Collins's article, noted his belief that this crossover appeal was due to his appearance on MTV.⁴⁷⁹ Smith's success, in many ways, was made possible following Run-D.M.C.'s *Raising Hell* (1986) receiving the distinction to be the first rap album to go platinum following their cover of

⁴⁷⁶ Felicia Angeja Viator, *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 216.

⁴⁷⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "2 Live Crew, Decoded," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1990, A23.

⁴⁷⁸ For a discussion of *American Bandstand*'s relationship to censorship debates, see: Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia*.

⁴⁷⁹ Glenn Collins, "Rap Music, Brash and Swaggering, Enters Mainstream" *The New York Times*, August 29, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/29/arts/rap-music-brash-and-swaggering-enters-mainstream.html>.

Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" (1975) on MTV, thereafter intensifying industry attention for the genre.

While previously confined to rock music, these debates became increasingly racialized as critiques of rap's sexual violence paralleled its industrial growth in the late 1980s. This shifting language from the sexual violence of "porn rock" to anxieties about urban sexual violence can be observed through a series of editorials by Tipper Gore. Privileging the impressionability of children using claims of social science research, Gore frequently embodied this sexual panic through her calls to protect children by "Curbing the Sexploitation Industry."⁴⁸⁰ Describing the dangers of sexual and racial epithets in rap, Gore followed these racial currents within media debates about the morality of rap music in "Hate, Rape and Rap."⁴⁸¹ In the editorial, she appealed to the performative power of lyrics to yield real social harm. Summoning the moral urgency of the issue, Gore seemed to exploit historical framings of the monstrous sexuality of Black men as violations of the safety of (frequently white) women. Castigating the commodification of misogyny, her selective use of evidence included an increase in sexual violence arrests in New York City for boys *aged 13* by about 200 percent in the last two years.⁴⁸² Situated in a period marked by hysteria over the cocaine crack epidemic, the racial imagination of urban landscapes as hot spots of crime positioned rap lyrics to be interpreted as coterminous criminal activity by the nation's urban youth. Drawing on the history of anti-urban moralism arising from the 19th-century onward, Gore's concern embodied thinly veiled ideologies of racial backlash, calling for the enhanced surveillance of rap music, and perhaps therefore Black artists, to protect women from

⁴⁸⁰ Tipper Gore, "Curbing the Sexploitation Industry," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/14/opinion/curbing-the-sexploitation-industry.html>.

⁴⁸¹ Tipper Gore, "Hate, Rape and Rap," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/01/08/hate-rape-and-rap/b4c16c35-4e96-4dec-8866-68ff6c1350f4>.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

sexual violence. Thus, while Gore had targeted 1980s popular culture from heavy metal to horror, this sexual concern over misogynistic lyrics became distinctly racialized by the early 1990s.

Against this rise in popularity on MTV, the genre would increasingly become situated within contemporary moral panics about obscenity in popular music lyrics.⁴⁸³ This situation reflected, in some senses, market taste, as a subgenre known as “gangster rap” featured music artists who played on urban tropes of Black masculinity. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar notes that this discourse against rap, particularly over aspects of its misogynistic reliance on gendered language like “bitches” and “hoes,” cannot be simply reduced to “debates over Black cultural expression and white fears of cultural invasion.”⁴⁸⁴ As Clarence Lusane has explained, “On the one hand, rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated and rebellious black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America. On the other hand, rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record producers.”⁴⁸⁵ Public debates about obscenity and rap music were a byproduct of racial anxieties about the growth of crime in the city, the rising rate of Black poverty following Reaganomics, and earlier public debates about media consumption that had first attracted moralist concerns about the lyrics of popular music.⁴⁸⁶

Importantly, critiques of rap were not necessarily shared by white media activists alone. For example, Dr. C. Delores Tucker from the National Congress of Black Women (NCBW) objected to the sexually explicit lyrics of rap music as misogynistic and led public protests in

⁴⁸³ Mathieu Deflem, in his study of the PMRC, defines a moral panic as involving “an exaggerated or disproportional reaction to a problem that is believed [to] threaten the moral order.” See: Mathieu Deflem, “Popular Culture and Social Control: The Moral Panic on Music Labeling,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2020): 17.

⁴⁸⁴ Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, “Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (November 1999): 166.

⁴⁸⁵ Clarence Lusane, “Rap, Race and Politics,” *Race & Class*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1993): 41.

⁴⁸⁶ To this point, Lusane notes that the Census Bureau observed an additional 1.2 million African Americans had fallen below the poverty line between 1986 and 1992. See: Lusane, “Rap, Race and Politics,” 43.

Washington against the genre's artists.⁴⁸⁷ Considering rap music for *The New York Times*, Michele Wallace acknowledged the ambivalence of certain traditions in rap music that trace their influence to blaxploitation films of the 1960s and what Wallace terms "an equally sexist tradition of Black comedy."⁴⁸⁸ The 2 Live Crew, she explains, fit within this tradition in which "black men trade ""toasts," stories in which dangerous bagmen and trickster figures like Stackolee and Dolomite sexually exploit women and promote violence among men."⁴⁸⁹ Michael Marriot gathered critiques, years later, from a range of Black voices, including bell hooks, who criticized the genre for reinforcing white stereotypes about Black communities. Marriot also connected the genre to attacks on young girls that had marked the summer of '93, citing claims that recent incidents of sexual assaults at municipal pools had featured chants of the popular rap song, "Whoomp! (There it is)" by rap-duo Tag Team.⁴⁹⁰ As Geoff Harkness notes, these criticisms of gangster rap echoed "class-based critiques of broader black American culture, illustrating the increased cultural and socioeconomic disparities described by scholars of the black middle class."⁴⁹¹ Within its transformation into a social problem in the context of the early 1990s, rap music's position in the nation's editorial sections reflected longstanding racist assumptions about media's ability to stir violence in African American audiences. Embodying aspects of this mindset nakedly, conservative George Will directly juxtaposed images of sexual violence in *Newsweek* from the Central Park

⁴⁸⁷ Dr. Tucker picketed the NAACP's Image Awards following Tupac Shakur's nomination in 1994 for a role in *Poetic Justice* (1993), over allegations of his sexual assault of a woman in New York City. For discussion of this incident, see: Craig Wolff, "Rap Performer is Charged in Midtown Sex Attack," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/20/nyregion/rap-performer-is-charged-in-midtown-sex-attack>.

⁴⁸⁸ Michele Wallace, "POP VIEW: When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music Is Rap," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/29/arts/pop-view-when-Black-feminism-faces-the-music-and-the-music-is-rap.html>. For further reading about the use of images of black men as hustlers and gangsters, see: Fernando Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 131-134.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Michael Marriot, "Hard-Core Rap Lyrics Stir Backlash," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/15/nyregion/hard-core-rap-lyrics-stir-backlash.html>.

⁴⁹¹ Geoff Harkness, *Chicago Hustle and Flow: Gangs, Gangsta Rap, and Social Class* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 13.

jogger case with the views expressed by rap lyrics, “Where can you get the idea that sexual violence against women is fun? From a music store, through Walkman earphones, from boom boxes blaring forth the rap lyrics of 2 Live Crew.”⁴⁹² Calling to go beyond these framings of misogyny and racism, Kimberlé Crenshaw observed how these controversies “present issues of gender violence in which racial politics are deeply implicated...in ways that seem impossible to capture fully within existing frameworks that separate racial politics from gender politics.”⁴⁹³ To this point, Will’s remarks reflected Tricia Rose’s observation that “the more public opinion, political leaders, and policymakers criminalize hip hop as the cultural example of a criminal way of thinking... hip hop style ... becomes a code for criminal behavior, and censoring the music begins to look more and more like fighting crime.”⁴⁹⁴ Within this context, as well, fears of Black male sexuality against the virtues of womanhood, traditionally coded as white, plays out a significant dynamic when looking at the racialization of these debates particularly over the issues of teen pregnancy and music lyrics as forms of sexual violence against women.

Disciplining Music Consumption, Rock the Vote, and the 1990 VMAs:

When rap group, 2 Live Crew, took to the stage at the 1990 MTV Video Music Awards (“VMAs”), their performance served as a centerpiece of the telecast’s political messaging. Challenging judicial, legal, and cultural efforts to classify rap lyrics as obscene, violent, and misogynistic, the group performed their recent single “Banned in the USA” (1990) against the backdrop of the arrests of members Luther Campbell and Chris Won Wong at a Florida

⁴⁹² George Will, “America’s Slide into the Sewer,” *Newsweek*, July 29, 1990, <https://www.newsweek.com/americas-slide-sewer-206924>.

⁴⁹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny,” in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 247.

⁴⁹⁴ Tricia Rose, “Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males,” *USA Today*, May 1994, 22.

nightclub.⁴⁹⁵⁴⁹⁶ Reclaiming the potency of lyrics to rap truth to power, 2 Live Crew explicitly placed their racial identity within the context of their arrest, “Freedom of speech will never die... We’re 2 Live, 2 Black, 2 strong ... We won’t be banned in the U-S-A.”⁴⁹⁷ Confusing the traumas of urban disinvestment with the incitement of crime, the framing of rap music as obscene, a byproduct of earlier record labeling debates, intertwined with what Bryan J. McCann has called “the mark of criminality,” i.e., “a rhetorical genre of performative blackness that privileges hypermasculinity, hyperviolence, and hypersexuality as central characteristics of black subjectivity.”⁴⁹⁸ The group’s arrest highlights the ways that such rhetoric was not merely confined to the symbolic order, as the 1990s featured a number of instances where prosecutors used rap lyrics as criminal evidence.⁴⁹⁹ At the 1990 VMAs, 2 Live Crew resisted this figuration of criminality against Black cultural expression in a decade where hardline tough-on-crime stances represented a spirit of bipartisanship, or as 2 Live Crew would rap, “corrupted politicians playing games, bringing us down to boost their fame.”

⁴⁹⁵ Steve Hochman, “Two Members of 2 Live Crew Arrested After X-Rated Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-06-11-ca-89-story.html>.

⁴⁹⁶ As Steve Jones notes, this moment was not the first legal trouble for 2 Live Crew, as an earlier obscenity charge was issued to a record store clerk in Florida for selling their album, *Is What We Are* (1986), to a minor, though this charge was later dropped. See: Steve Jones, “Ban(ned) in the USA: Popular Music and Censorship,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 78.

⁴⁹⁷ A copy of the MTV Video Music Awards was accessed through UCLA’s Film and Television Archive.

⁴⁹⁸ McCann’s work fits into a long line of scholarship in African American studies that take up the ways in which criminality is racialized. Bryan J. McCann, *The Mark of Criminality: Rhetoric, Race, and Gangsta Rap in the War-on-Crime Era* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2017), 3. Examining how racism structures public discourse, social space, and biopolitics, recent studies have continued to investigate racialized ideologies of criminality. See: Carl Suddler, *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019); Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Tera Eva Agyepong, *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago’s Juvenile Justice System, 1899-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁴⁹⁹ Erik Nielson and Andrea L. Dennis, *Rap on Trial: Race, Lyrics, and Guilt in America* (New York, NY and London, UK: The New Press, 2019), 61.

Known previously for their single “Me So Horny” (1989), the telecast, crucially, served as an opportunity for the group and MTV to intervene in the reception of rap as a music genre.⁵⁰⁰ In the performance, the group was framed visually against the text of the First Amendment, a juxtaposition that would highlight actor Eric Bogosian’s introduction of the group in explicitly national terms. Positioned as embodiments of true Americanism, Bogosian’s introduction rhetorically framed the group as the victims of a current blacklist effort, representative of the larger political attack on the arts, and the rise of moral panics about media consumption that coincided with a more confrontational youth culture on MTV. These critics were referenced obliquely by Bogosian: “I don’t think these people know the meaning of freedom. I don’t think these people know the meaning of being an American. I want to introduce my *fellow* Americans with honor, 2 Live Crew.” Here, the rap group was positioned in oppositional terms to the rising tide of cultural moralism, forcefully articulating the expressive rights of Black artists against attempts to criminalize culture. Taking up this nationalist framing, Luther Campbell would exclaim during the performance, “What is this? Is this not America? This is not China. This is not Russia. This is not the place where they brought down the [Berlin] Wall. This is America.” Spoken against the sounds of a fife playing “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” a song whose association with the Revolutionary War obscures its British origins, the performance attempted to intervene in censorship debates over Black cultural expression in explicitly nationalist terms.

In *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, James F. English tracks the development of awards industries as organized sites of societal value and

⁵⁰⁰ These controversies included Bill Clinton’s denouncement of Sister Souljah’s lyrics and community groups advocating boycotts over Ice T’s song “Cop Killer” (1992). See: Jeanita W. Richardson and Kim A. Scott, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America’s Culture of Violence in Context,” *Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 71, No. 3 (2002): 186.

cultural distinction.⁵⁰¹ In his accounting, modern versions of awards can be traced to the patronage system of the seventeenth century, while their history can claim heritage from art prizes in Ancient Greece. The establishment of Nobel Prizes, he argues, reveals how awards systems organize social, institutional, and ideological cultural objectives.⁵⁰² As the late-19th century facilitated a convergence between neoclassical prizes and art as a spectator sport, awards asserted institutional authority to proclaim cultural value. Influenced by English's work, this section examines the function of awards shows to serve as instruments of cultural exchange that represent complex syntheses of art, commerce, and publicity. In this context, English observes how cultural awards have become embedded within postcolonial debates since the 1960s. Whereas prizes have been historically intertwined within colonial apparatuses, their redevelopment illustrates new constructions of nationality and localism within global systems of culture. Tracing the rise of Ladysmith Black Mambazo as an international recording group, English examines how their local honors offered indices of authenticity that became available for recognition by global networks of capital organized by institutions like the Grammys. Within this context, the appearance of Ladysmith Black Mambazo on Paul Simon's Grammy-winning album *Graceland* (1986) led to global attention for their music with a Best Traditional Folk Album Grammy in 1988. Marking the end of South African apartheid, the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nelson Mandela in a prize ceremony that featured Mambazo's performance of Black South African authenticity in the global marketplace. This moment, for English, highlights how awards showcases participate in the construction of symbolic economies of music.⁵⁰³ To this point, English's interest in how awards organize economic systems of culture illustrates how awards showcases serve to discipline the

⁵⁰¹ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰² *Ibid*, 50

⁵⁰³ *Ibid*, 273-78.

ideological values of cultural consumption. This insight elucidates our examination of the 1990 Video Music Awards, precisely as it illustrates how this industry showcase worked to discipline the reception and branding of controversial music artists.

Since its first telecast in 1984, MTV's VMAs has distinguished itself from its competitors through its sense of provocation. John Sykes, vice president of production and promotion, originally teased the awards show as consistent with the network's brand identity.⁵⁰⁴ Specifically, Sykes promised the show would "reflect the irreverence of rock 'n' roll and the attitude of MTV."⁵⁰⁵ In important ways, this attitude significantly influenced production decisions of the awards show: "we looked at *every* moment," Sykes said, "to make sure there's an ingredient, an element of pacing that will keep the viewer by the set... it won't have the predictability that other awards shows have."⁵⁰⁶ Over the years, this ingredient of pacing mirrored the promotional operations of the music video form itself, as artists sought to commodify publicity into record sales. At the first telecast, Madonna's performance of "Like a Virgin" (1984) found cameras capturing close-ups of her writhing body in a wedding dress, thus intensifying the song's sexuality through the medium of televised live performance.⁵⁰⁷ This promotional attitude would present challenges for the network as artists, seeking to embody this spirit of attitude, engaged in brinksmanship with the moral standards of the U.S. public. In 1989, MTV apologized after Andrew Dice Clay's performance of his signature dirty nursery rhymes attracted outrage over his jokes' demeaning comments towards women.⁵⁰⁸ In 1991, music performer Prince displayed his posterior in a yellow-lace jumpsuit to perform his single "Gett Off" (1991). As possible censorship loomed,

⁵⁰⁴ Bill King, "MTV Stages First Video Music Awards Show," *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 14, 1984, 12P.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ Tom Popson, "MTV Awards Show to Set Fast Pace or Else," *Chicago Tribune*, September 14, 1984, n55.

⁵⁰⁷ Madonna, "Like A Virgin (Live MTV VMAs 1984)," September 24, 2018, YouTube Video, 3:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkSxhG4cbPo&feature=emb_logo.

⁵⁰⁸ Staff, "Live Entertainment & Music: Surprise Aplenty at MTV Awards; Young Gets Top Nod, Clay Gets Blue," *Variety*, September 13, 1989, 81-82.

MTV's public perception and its promotion of music produced potential economic challenges. Leveraging their platform, the 1990 VMAs represents, in part, how 2 Live Crew's performance of "Banned in the USA" worked to promote and discipline a specific image of the network as anti-censorship, pro-nationalist, and anti-racist.

Positioned defiantly against censors, 2 Live Crew's performance lambasted the state's attempted regulation of cultural expression and its uneven hand in policing the personal and political expression of Black rappers that had found them, in effect, "Banned in the USA." I raise 2 Live Crew's performance for how it places attention on the acts of political speech within MTV's youth culture as a reaction to the moralistic climate of Reagan's America. Further, MTV and RIAA supported these potentially obscene acts of speech by framing these lyrics within debates about censorship. Thus, the 1990 VMAs highlights how awards shows present compelling cultural sites in which dominant discourses of media industry are resisted and realized. Or, "critical industrial practices" as John Caldwell might describe them, "involving interpretive schemes...that are deployed within specific institutional contexts."⁵⁰⁹ As racist ideologies of criminality became positioned in terms of anti-sexist rhetoric about the violence of rap music, critical industrial practices re-framed these debates to orient audiences towards cultural consumption of music. Situated against the period's politicizing of queer and Black artists funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, MTV offered its programming as part of a broader citizenship practice about the representability of artists and their bodies within national popular culture. Through these industrial practices of self-theorizing, moreover, the VMAs stage functioned as a critical site that illustrates what John Hartley has observed as television's ability to teach new forms of

⁵⁰⁹ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 5.

citizenship.⁵¹⁰ Or, as Luther Campbell would more succinctly assert before 2 Live Crew's performance, "we all gonna tell you something tonight about this thing what they call citizenship."



Figure 20: Queen Latifah and Flavor Flav Introduce "Best Rap Video" at the 1990 VMAs

Presenting the award for Best Rap Video, Flavor Flav and Queen Latifah joked about the cultural dangers imagined by rap's critics, "So all the young people out there, please use caution in allowing adults to watch" (fig. 19) before the intro to the nominees featured censored placards over two men of color (fig. 20). In his monologue, Luther Campbell asserted a vision of multiracial citizenship in which, "The simple fact of it all is that we are bonded together by the First Amendment. Chinese, Black, green, purple, Jews, you have the

At the 1990 VMAs, these forms of industrial theorizing were on full display. Steven Tyler of Aerosmith poked fun at Tipper Gore and Senator Jesse Helms for their organizing of political pressure campaigns to clean up music and television: "Thank you Tipper and Jesse for making sure that as long as there are a few extra four letter words in the album, it will sell an extra



Figure 19: "Censored" Rap at the 1990 VMAs

right to listen to MC Hammer, Public Enemy, NWA, and yeah even 2 Live Crew." In doing so, Campbell asserted what Josh Kun has referred to as "monocultural nationalist listening within the

⁵¹⁰ John Hartley, "Democratainment," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 524.

rise of the “melting pot” school of American ethnic and racial theory.”⁵¹¹ As Campbell would state, “we are all one nation.” Intervening in the racist counterreaction to rap music’s white audience, 2 Live Crew’s performance captured the spirit of Black inclusion within national culture by asserting the protections of citizenship. In contrast to the racist assumptions about Black male sexuality that permeated public concern over rap, 2 Live Crew’s performance reclaimed its explicitly political dimensions as an expressive art form of urban Black experience. Using the court of public opinion, the 1990 VMAs intervened in obscenity debates starting to criminalize the sale and distribution of rap. More than this, however, this telecast illustrated how an industrialization of dissent on the VMAs stage functioned as part of a broader operation of public opinion management.

Just as debates about music labeling and censorship became inscribed into televised framings of politics, the reception of 2 Live Crew’s arrest had been mediated through televisual channels. This point can be observed most directly when Phil Donahue brought on 2 Live Crew to talk about their arrest. Holding an issue of *Time* with a cover story entitled “Dirty Words: America’s Foul-Mouthed Pop Culture,” Donahue emphasized the national controversy over their arrest and its position within obscenity debates.⁵¹² Joking, he asks his audience “and is it just me or are you worried about Madonna?” an apparent reference to the performer’s own contentions with threats of arrest during a Toronto performance on her *Blond Ambition* Tour. This question represents the ways in which such obscenity debates frequently played out through cultural attention to certain artists, such as Madonna and 2 Live Crew, that produced economic and political threats for their cultural expression. Situated against feminist debates over pornography and sexuality, these concerns extended to female artists who seemed to perform their own sexual self-

⁵¹¹Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, 27.

⁵¹²Accessed via PastBeta, “Donahue—Indecency & Obscenity – feat. 2 Live Crew – circa 1990 – 2 of 4,” YouTube Video, 14:11, May 16, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggqDiwojqdY>.

objectification. Donahue played a clip of Madonna's performance to wonder whether Madonna's lack of arrest reflected racist double standards for 2 Live Crew. In the audience questions, some guests expressed support noting that the parodic representations of sexuality captured by their video for "Me So Horny" (1989) were contextualized for audiences as scenes of fantasy, not references to the actual treatment of women. Another guest, a self-identified mother, complained to Campbell about protecting her children from this kind of sexual content. Campbell, in response, alleged that the mother's daughter would end up pregnant for not being properly educated about sex. While the mother resisted this allegation, Campbell's remarks re-situated the problem of teenage pregnancy from a cultural and therefore artistic problem into an educational and therefore parental one. Transforming this trope, a hallmark of PMRC's public messaging strategy, was significant as an assertion of rap's expressive politics, a point that was frequently lost in societal concerns about unwed mothers and the breakdown of the family unit. What the 2 Live Crew controversy makes so clear is how the meaning of music consumption became inscribed into the culture war debates within the medium of television.

Crucially, the 1990 VMAs telecast carried out this preoccupation with the symbolic economy of musicianship within the ads for the awards show. One spot ad was placed in partnership with the emerging "Rock the Vote" campaign started by Jeff Ayeroff and Virgin Records with coalition support from other record companies to encourage young fans to participate in the democratic process. Among the ads placed in the telecast, one featured Iggy Pop having his

mouth taped over.⁵¹³ Against this image, the First Amendment is read to emphasize the political valences of popular music stars as embodied agents of the freedom of expression. At the commercial's end, a placard from Virgin Records states "VOTE" (fig. 21). Echoing the same use of the First Amendment as 2 Live Crew's performance of "Banned in the USA," this ad's



Figure 21: "VOTE" Advertisement at the 1990 VMAs

presence represented how record companies, artists, and MTV attempted to organize the reception of such artists in explicitly national terms, by continuing Virgin Records' earlier campaign to resist music labeling with stickers claiming that "Censorship is Unamerican."⁵¹⁴ Communicating this message, these Rock the Vote commercials aimed to recast controversial artists as politically significant within nationalist beliefs about First Amendment freedoms.



Figure 22: Madonna's Erotic Nationalism

As she presented "Vogue" (1990) at the VMAs, Madonna performed this same music nationalism in another Rock the Vote ad. The PSA featured her draped in an American flag, wearing nothing but red underwear next to her two gay dancers, Jose Gutierrez and Luis Camacho (fig. 22).⁵¹⁵ Embracing the political orientation of her

⁵¹³ Accessible via Video Disorder, "Rock the Vote – Iggy Pop (1990)," YouTube Video, 00:30, August 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpJjU-LMuc4>.

⁵¹⁴ Chuck Philips, "Virgin Records to Strike Back with Free Speech Stickers," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-19-ca-370-story.html>.

⁵¹⁵ Accessible via rockthevote, "Madonna Rock the Vote PSA 1990," YouTube Video, 00:49, October 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxLHkGfNgxM>.

musicianship, Madonna situated this nationalism within African American struggles over civil rights, rapping: “Dr. King, Malcolm X, Freedom of Speech is as good as sex. . . . We need beauty, we need art, we need government away from art [*laughing*].” Not without her trademark shock value, Madonna ended the video on a Rock the Vote title card, joking “if you don’t vote, you’re going to get a spankie.”⁵¹⁶ Coming into a period where Madonna’s brinksmanship with the press over her masquerade of female sexuality would culminate in her book *Sex* (1992), the ad also reframed Madonna’s controversies that had led to consumer boycotts following the release of “Like a Prayer” (1989). The video, directed by Mary Lambert, became controversial over Madonna’s use of religious symbols, in part, to critique U.S. race relations after her on-screen persona witnesses false accusations against an African American man for the death of a white woman. Some of this controversy reflected the video’s depiction of an interracial kiss with a Black religious figure and Madonna’s dancing against burning crosses in an allusion to the practices of racial terror and lynching. Nor was Madonna widely recognized as anti-racist with bell hooks asking directly about the performer’s use of Black religious elements in the music video, “Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?”⁵¹⁷ In terms of Catholic attention, Madonna would receive public censure from Pope John Paul II who called for a boycott of Madonna’s tour in Italy. Remixing nationalism and eroticism, Madonna’s PSA represented the broader reorientation of musicianship within ideologies of civil rights and artistic freedom at the 1990 VMAs.

These nationalist framings of artistic expression would represent the industry’s focus on the reception of individual artists, reflecting how this nationalism worked to re-orient public understandings of the ideology of cultural consumption. As concerns about the lyrical content in

⁵¹⁶ “Madonna Rock the Vote PSA 1990.”

⁵¹⁷ bell hooks, “Madonna – Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York, NY: Routledge 1992), 145-157.

gangster rap found hearings in congress in 1994, the music industry seemed to take Tipper Gore's calls for information, not censorship, to heart. President of RIAA, Hilary Rosen appeared in front of congress and extolled the industry's adherence to the Parental Advisory Program as "a positive response of the music industry as responsible corporate citizens to provide useful information to parents."⁵¹⁸ Supporting this claim, Rosen underscored the civic mindedness of the industry's rappers for serving African American communities. Despite prior political controversies attached to Chuck D and Ice Cube, they were praised in Rosen's statement for "giving back to the community and stopping gang violence" by talking to young kids in inner city schools and inmates at prisons. Supporting Black youth and prisoners served to embody the ways in which RIAA navigated the racial anxieties of Congress by promoting an image of African American artists responsible for their community's cultural uplift. For instance, Public Enemy and Queen Latifah were praised for raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Stop the Violence Movement, as Rosen notes, "geared specifically at fighting black-on-black crime."⁵¹⁹ Here, it is directly observable how else the language of race within tough on crime politics refracted into the industry's public branding of Black artists in the music industry.

Reimagining this pedagogical function of media and music, aspects of this messaging permeated MTV's cable network, where its special report on gangster rap in 1994 afforded artists a platform to discuss the other side of the debate over lyrics.⁵²⁰ Within the report, rap was sentimentalized as a reaction to the forms of violence that marked inner city Black poverty, a context frequently emptied out of national debates. Attempting to define this subgenre, Snoop Dog

⁵¹⁸ Music Lyrics and Commerce: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives, One Hundred Third Congress, Second Session, February 11 and May 5, 1994. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994, 132.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Accessed via EMUSIC TV Entertainment, "Gangsta Rap: An MTV News Special Report," YouTube Video, 30:45, January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-DvCD3vRE8>.

stated that “gangster rap is [an] opportunity for people in the ghetto who have nothing to do with themselves such as ex-gang members, ex-drug dealers.”⁵²¹ Tupac Shakur emphasized the genre’s analogous relationship to the performances of ethnic Italian identity found in an array of prior gangster films. Rapper Vinnie described the themes of violence, gangster identity, and confrontation with the law as a “cry” from what he saw as the conditions of genocide in urban centers arising from decades of disinvestment. These emphases acknowledged the underexamined cultural situation of rap minimized in discussions over rap’s lyrical crimes. Countering facile critiques of the genre as sexually violent, the special report also featured a segment on female rappers who spoke against misogyny in rap. On cleaning up this language, Queen Latifah argued “the message has to come from everybody. It’s not a responsibility of female rappers to say here you don’t call us “bitches.””⁵²² In this way, debates about the obscenity of rap lyrics also worked to provide a public platform for female rappers as industry-supported counter-images to the genre’s sexual politics. This messaging by Queen Latifah, further, reflected the performance of celebrity activism featured in her single “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993) that directly challenged the use of pejoratives for women in rap. Through such visibility, Latifah’s presence, also featured at the 1990 VMAs, illustrated the ways in which MTV operated as a crucial site of industrial self-reflexivity. Analyzing the promotional battle over the reception of artists through music nationalism illustrates how MTV’s television network became inscribed within broader debates of obscenity and cultural citizenship. Through this lens, the 1990 VMAs embodies how industrial agendas, merging economic, cultural, and political interests, play out at televised awards shows by disciplining the ideological value of consumer activity. At the same time, they illustrate how the issue of women’s

⁵²¹ “Gangsta Rap: An MTV News Special Report,” YouTube Video.

⁵²² Ibid.

sexuality, first coded through rock music as a threat and then later rap music, responded to these instances by re-signifying the political reading of such performances of sexuality.

Echoes of the MTV Past – Sexual Performance on YouTube:

Critically, it is important to examine how themes of sexual reclamation of the female body, rooted in debates around urbanism and feminism, would be synthesized in the emergence of Black female stars working within this tradition of self-objectification. In particular, Nicki Minaj's performance career represents a critical way in which the legacies of censorship debates in the 1980s and 1990s altered the modes of public address for female divas to situate their performances of sexuality within a tradition of anti-censorship practice. Within this context, Nicki Minaj, the stage persona of Trinidadian-born Onika Tanya Maraj, who became famous for releasing a series of mixtapes in the late 2000s, has dramatized the potency of anti-sexist and anti-censorship rhetoric in staging her body as a representation of Black female sexuality. For many, her career gained its first significant bump after releasing a verse on Kanye West's single "Monster" during the lead-up to her first album *Pink Friday* (2010). Her biggest solo hits have been "Super Bass" (2010), "Starships" (2012), and "Anaconda" (2014) that each incorporated unique elements of pop vocals within her signature trademark rapping style. Throughout her performance work, Minaj mixes traditionally Black and white vocal styles, constructed through genre distinctions of hip hop and pop music that have allowed her to become a go-to guest artist on tracks for Ariana Grande, Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Beyoncé. In her earlier vocal performances, Minaj incorporates a persona known as "The Harajuku Barbie" that has allowed the singer to perform and deconstruct notions of white femininity in pop music. Noting this dynamic, Uri McMillan describes Minaj as a "deviant

figure working at the plexus of performance and visibility.”⁵²³ This deviance has manifested itself as the consequence of her provocative sonic and visual representations of blackness. Her vocal style combines an array of different accents and personalities that signify the seeming authenticity of both her Trinidadian and Queens roots, expressing herself as a self-conscious representation of Black female identity. More than this, Minaj’s public performances of Black female selfhood have moved past just simple incorporations of accents and costumes as distinct aesthetics of the ways in which we come to know and identify bodies through figurations of social identity. Minaj presents herself unapologetically in her experience as a Black woman within the media industry by taking her body up as an object and subject of media representation.

Throughout her career, Minaj has been explicitly depicted as a “diva” through high-profile incidents with other artists in the press from Taylor Swift to Miley Cyrus. Public coverage of Minaj has frequently positioned her behavior according to this prima donna lens. These similar accusations of diva-ness are similarly situated in the form of critiques about female celebrity riders, i.e. a set of requests and/or demands necessary for booking the talent’s performance. Numerous studies could be done about the gendered representation of these riders in gossip blogs to think about the disparate characterizations of riders along gendered lines, wherein male celebrity riders are presented as humorously idiosyncratic and female celebrity riders are framed through senses of female entitlement. Perhaps emblematic of these gendered lines, Frank Turner of The Sleeping Souls accused Minaj of being a diva following Scotland’s *T in the Park* festival in 2012. The accusation came via a blog entry that Turner wrote, which focused on his description of Minaj as not respecting the crew:

⁵²³ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 207.

Personally, I feel that showing up late and not apologizing is a little weak. But the thing that got to me yesterday was more about respect for a different group of people: the crew. . . . If there's one person in the midst of this who has a pretty easy, highly paid job (show up, mime, go home) who refuses to do this, and thereby fucks up the day of all the hard-working, sleep-deprived, exhausted, under-appreciated festival crew, well, that pisses me off. It means everyone has to do a ton more work just to make sure that the people at the festival and all the other bands don't have their day ruined. . . . For some reason, doing this when you're holding a microphone makes you "artistic", "difficult" or maybe a "Diva". In any other walk of life it's called being rude, selfish and inconsiderate.⁵²⁴

These types of accusation are rampant in the music industry against female performers. Their perspective is often partial at best and tends to minimize the amount of visual presentation necessary to appear in public as a female performer particularly in established ways to avoid negative media attention that ranges from spectacular and binding costumes to makeup and other gendered performance practices.

Interestingly, Minaj has frequently used her public statements to re-author herself in a manner that has addressed the diva critique. As she prepared the debut of her first album in 2010, Minaj was featured in a documentary for MTV entitled "My Time Now." The documentary presented routine behind-the-scenes footage of a performer going through the motions of a new album campaign. The significance of the documentary was in how it structured the reception of Minaj as predicated on unapologetic agency regardless of her gender. In an interview, the singer

⁵²⁴ Frank Turner, "Twit-Storming," *Frank-Turner*, July 9, 2012, <http://frank-turner.com/2012/07/09/twit-storming/>.

addressed generically presented rumors about her social behavior. She called out the double standards of the way that her body was treated as a woman:

“But every time I—every time I put my foot down and stand up for myself, it’s like ‘we’ve heard about Nicki Minaj! Nicki Minaj shut down a photo shoot! Oh my god! No one wants to work with Nicki Minaj!’ I’m glad you heard. Now, when I come to a photo shoot, let it be of quality. You know why? Because I put quality in what I do. I spend time and I spend energy and I spend effort and I spend everything I have, every fiber of my being to give people quality. So if I turn up to a photo shoot and you had—you got a fifty dollar clothes budget and some sliced pickles on the motherf*cking board, you wanna know what? No, I am gonna leave. Is that wrong? For wanting more for myself? Wanting people to treat me with respect? But you know what, next time they know better. But had I accepted the pickle juice, I would be drinking pickle juice right now. When I am assertive, I’m a bitch. When a man is assertive, he’s a boss. (He bossed up.) He bossed up! No negative connotation behind "bossed up." But lots of negative connotation behind being a bitch.⁵²⁵

Minaj’s positioning re-frames negative views about female entitlement to center notions of professional integrity in her caring for the quality of work she expects for herself; such negativity about her professional behavior, then, is recast as premised on the double standards women face in music industry. That is, Minaj draws attention to her own embodiment as a woman in the workplace to manage public critiques about her performance persona. This form of self-authoring is a familiar dynamic within female pop celebrity that takes the situation of media labor – i.e.

⁵²⁵ *Nicki Minaj: My Time Now*, Michael John Warren, MTV, November 28, 2010.

interview settings – to situate and emphasize the work ethic of the performer. By taking up such social criticism, Minaj re-casts the “diva” label and grounds it within the respectability of hard work in the U.S.

Through such attention, Minaj also seizes space to challenge the construction of media personalities by calling attention to the practices of racialization and gendering that occur in media criticism. Minaj, as a performance persona, illustrates how the affective success of the “diva” is represented through her opposition to the perceived cultural maligning of women. This perception is rendered plausible precisely because it accesses a range of cultural and social discourses about the state of female marginalization in society. In these perceptions of female marginalization, the capacity of women to speak out socially about such marginalization is usually understood to be limited or silenced. Minaj’s willingness to speak out about such industry double standards has helped frame her celebrity’s diva reputation as a reflection of gendered double standards or as a form of empowerment and survival mechanism against the tough demands of commercial industry. This unruliness, i.e. to “boss up,” refuses to accept the routine and unfair status accorded to Black women in society and presents Minaj’s public visibility as a reaction to the repertoire of images and scripts that burden the representation of Black women. I situate this moment of Mina’s “self-authoring” of her divaness as a pivotal moment for how the Minaj persona has taken on the burden of representation as a Black woman in the music industry. I argue that this awareness about Minaj as the subject of media’s relationship to social history is a structuring frame that allows us to understand the relationship of Minaj’s presentation of her persona with the representation of Black women in the music industry more broadly; a subject that is framed throughout moments in her publicity and promotional work.

The remainder of this chapter turns to the release and publicity campaign of Minaj's "Anaconda" (2014) as a case study for how female stars, like Minaj, place their unruly bodies, framed through understandings of sexual objectification and censorship, as reclaimed objects against historically imagined, but no less real, marginalization. An attention to statements on social media around the provocative performance of Black female identity in "Anaconda" allows us to access and frame how the self-authoring of the celebrity body rhetorically provides a sense of social and historical change to audiences by positioning their own representations of self against antiquated ideologies of race and gender. In doing so, we understand how modern divas perform their body in terms of their social identity. Further, our attention here provides us access to the ways in which scandals of sexuality allow audiences to adopt and form identities through how they draw attention to the political stakes of identity as the object of media representation. As such, the contemporary politics of the diva, here, are positioned in battles over identity by attempting to intervene in a historical imagination about the maintenance of gendered and racial inequities in media production.

The first knowledge audiences had of Minaj's "Anaconda" came on July 24, 2014 with the release of the single's promotional image.⁵²⁶ Emphatically sexualized, the image finds Minaj looking over her shoulder at the audience while wearing a thong that seems to disappear within her prominently displayed backside (fig. 23).



Figure 23: Nicki Minaj's Promotional Image for "Anaconda"

⁵²⁶ Travis Reilly, "Minaj Flaunts Air Jordans and Her Assets for Racy 'Anaconda' Cover," *The Wrap*, July 24, 2014, <https://www.thewrap.com/nicki-minaj-flaunts-air-jordans-and-her-assets-for-racy-anaconda-cover-photo/>.

The image of a Black woman's behind, frustratingly, appears quite common in the music industry, as the appropriation of racial authenticity through "twerking" in such songs as "We Can't Stop" (2013) by white tween star Miley Cyrus affirms. Minaj's work, in opposition, draws upon the visual discourse of blackness in its remixing of Sir Mix-A-Lot's own ode to Black women from the single "Baby Got back," framing how "Anaconda" approaches cultural stereotypes of Black women as an object of historical representation. Upon its first 24 hours of release, its music video had reached 19.6 million views, breaking the then-current streaming record on VEVO.⁵²⁷ Since music video consumption had transferred to the internet following MTV's programming shift to reality television throughout the aughts, Minaj's record here is quite significant. After eleven days, VEVO certified that the video had reached 100 million views.⁵²⁸ In this section, I consider how Minaj's type of visual spectacle of race in pop music, best summarized by an excessive re-employment of racialized media stereotypes, provides audiences a controlled reclaiming of social identity by intervening in the perceived social history of how that identity has been represented in popular culture. Thus, Minaj's performance of sexuality attempts to assert representational agency over the Black female body. More specifically, "Anaconda" frames Minaj's body through sexual display that calls attention to her performance of a genre of Black female bodies in hip-hop music. By analyzing how this represented body references the histories of Black female representation, I explore how Minaj's body becomes available within larger discourses of Black female representation. I do this through both close textual analysis of the music video's playful rehearsal of Black female images as objectification and how these become later framed by Minaj's social

⁵²⁷ Hilary Lewis, "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' Video Breaks Vevo Record," *Billboard*, August, 22, 2014, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6229110/nicki-minaj-anaconda-vevo-record>.

⁵²⁸ At present, the video holds approximately 835 million; this number was measured as of January 14, 2019. See: Nicki Minaj, "Anaconda," in *The Pinkprint*, Young Money/Cash Money/Republic, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDZX4ooRsWs>.

media presence. In describing this provocative or ‘excessive’ display of the female body, I explain how Minaj’s social media presences dramatizes her body as an object of media representation through its reference to the longer histories of censorship of Black cultural production that point back to the political and cultural conditions of the early 1990s.

Within the opening montage in “Anaconda,” Minaj’s body is depicted atop a bridge flanked by two women of color by her side. The immediate opening on these women appeals to a sense of their history as racialized bodies of representation through the setting’s jungle location, a setting that, in a certain sense, echoes the Dorothy Dandridge soundie for “Jig in the Jungle” (1941). Cutting between these bodies to playful images of sexual titillation, these scenes provide both an embodiment of male sexual desire and its parody. These intercut images feature a pineapple atop a spinning record player and a coconut bubbling over with its own milk. Minaj and her dancers “twerk” their behinds and perform similar cultural senses of Black female sexuality as rendered in Miley Cyrus’s 2013 performance work. In one scene, Minaj is pictured helping her background dancers practice exercising their form; another shot features her background dancers in shirts with giant lettering on their shirts that say “BUTT” as though to make the potential for objectification patently obvious. While this conventionality and winking nod to sexual objectification is seen as the roots of postfeminist media culture, Minaj’s video frames this knowingness around sexual objectification by calling attention to these images as a genre of objectification for Black women and their bodies. Representative of a renewed sexual explicitness in pop music, the video, in some senses, reflected the shift towards viral YouTube stardom by then-recent changes to *Billboard*’s music charts that placed growing emphasis on digital distribution. In February 2013, the industry organization released an announcement that streaming data from YouTube would impact the methodology for calculating “The Hot 100,” one of the music industry’s main indicators of chart

success. The change incorporated not only just official videos on YouTube but also derivative versions of “user-generated clips that utilize authorized audio.”⁵²⁹ Their announcement emphasized the effects of this change by noting that “Harlem Shake” a song by producer Baeur debuted at No. 1 thanks to the inclusion of YouTube streams without which it would have placed lower in the top fifteen.⁵³⁰ The growing role of YouTube in music industry calculations reflected a return of interest in music videos for their role as a promotional device at the height of MTV’s music programming in the 1980s and 1990s. Pop stars, like Nicki Minaj, benefited from this industry change precisely because it gave female-driven pop music further opportunity to commercialize the sexual provocation that Madonna had embodied during the MTV video era.

Calling attention to a history of images in hip hop’s representation of their bodies, “Anaconda” presents itself in dialogue with what Patricia Hill Collins has termed “controlling images.”⁵³¹ Her study in “Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression” traces how the visual and social representation of Black women are used in the ideological justification for race, gender, and class inequality. Collins categorizes four types of images that work to control Black female sexuality: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and jezebel. The fourth, the figure of the jezebel, is the image most directly summoned by “Anaconda.” As Collins states, “the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central to the nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression.”⁵³² These types of representation have been described by Collins and others as necessary in the justification of “providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual

⁵²⁹ Billboard Staff, “Hot 100 News: Billboard and Nielsen Add YouTube Video Streaming to Platforms,” *Billboard*, February 20, 2013, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1549399/hot-100-news-billboard-and-nielsen-add-youtube-video-streaming-to-platforms>.

⁵³⁰ Billboard Staff, “Hot 100 News: Billboard.”

⁵³¹ Collins, “Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression,” in *Black Feminist Thought*, 266.

⁵³² *Ibid*, 271.

assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women”⁵³³ as well as the moral consequences of increased fertility through motherhood. While “Anaconda” does not reflect upon the institution of chattel slavery in producing social knowledge and stereotypes, the video appeals to the ways in which the Black female body has been racialized by music video genres.

One central way that “Anaconda” achieves this effect is through its sampling of older hip hop songs like Sir Mix-A-Lot’s “Baby Got Back” (1992). Reaching the number one spot on Billboard nearly two months after its release, critics were outraged for the song’s fetishizing of the Black female behind, yet this stood against the avowed intentions of the song. Besides being part of a genre of one-hit wonders produced throughout the 1990s, Mix-A-Lot’s stated interest in the song was to celebrate Black women’s beauty as an alternative to the cultural premium placed on White-European beauty standards. Within the music video and lyrics, Sir Mix-A-Lot’s team took pains to represent cultural discrimination against Black women as the object of representation in the cultural industries. The song opened upon a monologue spoken by two white women at the video’s beginning:

"Oh, my, god, Becky, look at her butt. It is so big. She looks like one of those rap guys' girlfriends. Who understands those rap guys? They only talk to her, because she looks like a total prostitute, okay? I mean, her butt, it's just so big. Ugh, I can't believe it's just so round, it's like out there, I mean, ugh, gross. Look! She's just so Black!"⁵³⁴

Interestingly, these are precisely the tropes that Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” draws from, particularly as it places her single within a genealogy of discourses about the objectification of

⁵³³ Collins, “Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression,” 271.

⁵³⁴ Sir Mix-a-Lot, “Baby Got Back,” YouTube Video, 4:13, SirMixALotVEVO, March 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X53ZSxkQ3Ho>.

Black women and their bodies. Jannell Hobson has asserted that the music video for “Baby Got Back” works to present the voluptuous nature of Black women as a marker of their authenticity and desirability, yet the video tends to reinforce a hypersexual and comical nature of these images.⁵³⁵ Further, I would add that the parodic interchange between the two white women reinforces how Sir Mix-A-Lot’s production maintains the cultural surveillance of Black women and their bodies. Despite the song’s limited approach in representing Black female sexuality, the song was the subject of concern and censorship. Due to outrage during the song’s release, MTV placed the song’s video into its after-9pm rotation. Indeed, it was reports of this change that drove demand for the song, as it only reached the top position on the music charts after this change had been rendered. The outrage should not be surprising as we have seen that hip hop and rap had throughout the 1980s and 1990s attracted a significant amount of attention and critique in its representation of Black female sexuality for being too graphic and misogynistic. An emphasis on seeing the butt as a kind of exploited object, as we can see, had a certain effect of censoring the Black female body due to worries about the sexual scripts of hip hop culture on young men and women. That Minaj’s music video attempts to intervene within these older debates and new cultural trends of “twerking” is unsurprising, particularly as the video’s generation of controversy made it attractive to the viral mechanisms of early digital stardom; however, it also positions Minaj’s “Anaconda” within this cultural genealogy as a historical reclaiming of the subject position of Black women and their bodies within hip hop music, precisely because such positions for Black women have widely been understood as complicated and exploitative.

⁵³⁵ Jannell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 97.

The sensational circulation of Black women and their bodies, as Jennifer C. Nash has argued, is a recurrent feature of how Black women are commodified in cultural industries. One prominent colonial antecedent for these circulations reaches far back to the exhibitions of the “Hottentot Venus,”⁵³⁶ the name given to African Khoikhoi women who were shown in European touring circuits during the nineteenth century. One woman, Saartjie Baartman, became among the most famous of these women. An 1815 print entitled “Les Curieux en extase” or “The curious in ecstasy” (fig. 24), emphasizes the intense, humorous, and uncomfortable fascination Europeans had towards what they saw as this essentialized African body.⁵³⁷⁵³⁸ The exhibition of these women like Baartman distills the historical dimensions of how the display of Black women’s bodies has deep roots in the social structures of colonialism. It



Figure 24: “Les Curieux en Extase” (1815)

is not hard to see how the public fascination with twerking during the pop music cycle of 2013, also put forth by Miley Cyrus in “We Can’t Stop,” echoes these historical roots, where the Black female body today still serves as a sexual spectacle within the cultural industries. Beyond just twerking, emphases on Black women’s posteriors represent a fraught history within dance and performance cultures as scholars have noted that dance practices like the “Black Bottom” were popularized throughout the 1920s as the product of white Europeans and Americans appropriating

⁵³⁶ Jennifer C. Nash, “Pleasurable Blackness,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*, ed. Louisa Allen and Mary Lou Rasmussen (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 266.

⁵³⁷ Louis Francois Charon, “Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers,” *The British Museum*, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=691448&partId=1.

⁵³⁸ Nash, “Pleasurable Blackness,” 268.

stereotyped versions of Black popular culture.⁵³⁹ To be sure, these colonial dimensions of the body also extend to the representation of Latinx identities in popular U.S. culture, particularly in the focus on Jennifer Lopez's posterior that marked the emergence of her celebrity within the context of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the case of Minaj's music video, "Anaconda" appears to draw on these antecedents and places Minaj within a green-screen jungle encampment that appeals to this colonial context. Contemporary racial performances of sexuality in these music videos, thus, appear to represent not only the re-staging of the Black female body within contemporary media industry, but these performances are situated as reclamations of this body within continuing colonial histories.

As many critics have noticed, central to the narrative of "Anaconda" is the construction of a form of address that privileges Minaj's own agency and autonomy. Critics of hip hop and rap music have characterized the genre's poetics broadly as validating the existence of the frequently male performer. In this respect, Black women in these videos have often functioned as indices of male wealth and empowerment within this visual culture. The familiarity with these conventions of female display has generated various terms to refer to these types of female performers of color, such as a "video girl" or "video vixen." In 2005, Karrine Steffans published a memoir entitled *Confessions of a Video Vixen* that recounted her career as this type of performer for a range of rap and hip hop music videos.⁵⁴⁰ In "Anaconda," these layers of agency and autonomy accrue not only through the playful and frenetic incorporation of tropical fruits that queer and ironize male sexual desire, but this theme plays out through the music video's final scene in which Minaj takes up the performance situation of the video girl for her audience. Through a guest performance with

⁵³⁹ Danielle Robinson, "Oh, You Black Bottom!" Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teaching of 1920s New York," *The Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1-2 (Summer/Winter 2006): 19-42.

⁵⁴⁰ Karrine Steffans, *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

celebrity rapper Drake, Minaj reverses the relationship b/w video girl and hip hop artist. Drake's presence is marked through his immobility as he is relegated to a chair for the entirety of his appearance. As he sits there, Minaj performs sexually for him. Her performance references contested Black female dance practices through her twerking to tease the rapper. In this way, "Anaconda" takes up the situation of hip-hop's representation of the Black female body and reverses its power dynamics. As Minaj's body gives the rapper a lap dance, Drake visibly shows his inability to control himself through the micro-movements of his hands. These gestures emphasize how the rapper is visibly discomforted and aroused by Minaj's performance of sexuality. The scene's climax presents Drake's failure to control himself as he moves his hand towards Minaj's body. Her response is a simple smacking of his hand away as she leaves the scene, thus denying his act of sexual conquest.

Minaj's appeal to the authenticity of her Black femininity is located through her vocal performance. This performance has been described by Uri McMillan as a "blistering array of accents, personalities, and cultural references, echoing how "the experience of zaniness is one of physical bombardment."⁵⁴¹ Perhaps most notably, the music track augments Minaj's sense of voice by ridiculing male sexuality through the incorporation of her laughter. In juxtaposing her laughter with the image of Drake's sexual frustration, the music video acknowledges and identifies the distance between the Black female body as a genre of cultural performance and Minaj's own agency and voice. In an interview with *GQ*, Minaj emphasized the role of her own humor as a construction of female agency within the video. She explained the role of the fruit in her music video: "At first I'm being sexual with the banana, and then it's like, 'Ha-ha, no.' ... Yeah, that was important for us to show in the kitchen scene, because it's always about the female taking back the

⁵⁴¹ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 208.

power, and if you want to be flirty and funny that's fine, but always keeping the power and the control in everything."⁵⁴² While the music video references the colonial antecedents of the jezebel in its modern forms, Minaj's body functions as the reclaimed object of Black female representation, referencing a genre of female bodies in the music industry that have been represented through sexual objectification. Thus, Minaj represents her body, within a larger social landscape, as a site of imaginative investment, as a body enveloped by the numerous histories of marginalization that mark and organize the perception of Black women in society. Her claiming of agency in these images of Black female sexuality both perform and trouble dominant representations of Black women that construct their body as a genre of visual discourse. This claiming of agency was strengthened in the social media framing of her own body; and as such, highlights the ways in which Minaj drew upon the available technologies of publicity to frame and author her body as a representation of authentic Black female identity against cultural conditions of censorship.

This chapter has focused on the ways that the female body has been contested within the music culture organized by MTV. In the case of Minaj's video, this body is framed and reframed through self-conscious displays that attempt to intervene in the imaginative histories of how industry genres construct the body as a visually knowable object. To achieve this effect, celebrity performers often re-mediate the representation of their body as the object of public discourse. This

⁵⁴² Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Nicki Minaj: Cheeky Genius," *GQ*, October 19, 2014, <https://www.gq.com/story/nicki-minaj>.

mediation emphasizes discursive circulations of information as necessary components in how the body becomes a visually knowable object of social life and the ways that performance personae like Minaj attempt to intervene in these histories for their audience. Upon the release of the promotional image for “Anaconda,” Minaj became the subject of memes. Seizing on the “meme-value” of Minaj’s body, Miley Cyrus also



Figure 25: Miley Cyrus’s Performance of the Black Female Body as Meme

released her own promotional image of herself in the pink thong (fig. 25). Minaj expressed outrage to her fans on social media over the meme, asking “Give me one good reason why Miley made this her twitter avi #AnacondaOniTunes.”⁵⁴³ Minaj’s fans who engaged with the photo framed Cyrus’s image as a failed attempt to perform Black female sexuality. One response to Minaj on Twitter from “@samuelminajj” noted, “Because She Got No Booty,”⁵⁴⁴ another from “@madmsatan” stated the point more explicitly, “She wish she had a booty so she took your ass and made it white.”⁵⁴⁵ This moment of Minaj “calling out” Cyrus heightened its affective address to those familiar with the critiques about Cyrus’s own problematic behavior incorporating twerking and Black performance culture into her media presence throughout 2013. At the same time, this meme of Minaj’s body, extrapolated into new contexts, recalls in digital forms some of the very same colonial migrations of the Black female body as an object of both sexual spectacle

⁵⁴³ Nicki Minaj, “#AnacondaOniTunes” Instagram, August 10, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/riP9aer8af>.

⁵⁴⁴ @Samuelminajj, “Response to Nicki Minaj,” Twitter, August 20, 2014, <https://twitter.com/Samuelminajj/status/498603132306595842>.

⁵⁴⁵ @Madmsatan, “Response to Nicki Minaj,” Twitter, August 10, 2014, <https://twitter.com/madmsatan/status/498602952761028609>.

and humor. Minaj’s framing of the politics of her own representation of Black female sexuality in “Anaconda” is put into relation to white iterations of Black female performance practices. Thus, these framings challenge audiences to engage with Minaj’s representation of the Black female



Figure 26: Nicki Minaj Highlighting Double Standards for Women’s Bodies

body as a claiming of sexual agency within already constituted visual discourses of media culture.

Throughout the rollout of the single campaign, Minaj frequently re-authored her performing body in relation to racist visual discourse. The singer tweeted “Racism is Alive & Well,” in reaction to controversy over her promotional image.⁵⁴⁶ After expected critics like *The National Review* and others aimed criticism at Minaj, she posted a series of images on her Instagram to call attention to the various respectability politics that impact Black women and perceptions of their bodies. The photos she chose displayed a collection of white women in swimwear captioning each with the title “Acceptable” (fig. 26).⁵⁴⁷ The picture represented a

⁵⁴⁶ Nicki Minaj, “Racism is alive and well,” Twitter, July 23, 2014, <https://twitter.com/NICKIMINAJ/status/492001633258065920>.

⁵⁴⁷ Dan Reilly, “Nicki Minaj Ponders Why Her Ass-Tastic ‘Anaconda’ Cover Is Unacceptable,” *Spin*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.spin.com/2014/07/nicki-minaj-anaconda-single-cover-response/>.

bricolage of contexts but mostly from *Sports Illustrated*, a magazine with a mostly male readership that includes erotic though usually clothed images of women. In juxtaposing her body to these media contexts, Minaj's social media posts attempted to author public controversy against her work as part of longer histories of racism. These posts muted the number of Black voices that had taken issue with Minaj for her seeming embodiment of overly sexualized depictions of Black women. Minaj's social media shifted focus away from these and other critiques about the potentially obscene readings of her art and took up her body as an object of controversy that represented the cultural violence and oppression that Black women experience in society. Thus, Minaj's framing of her own body invited her audience to read her art through the lens of her performance of Black womanhood against historical oppression within the U.S. as rooted in media representation.

Her social media's engagement with her body as a discursive construction of blackness rejected respectability politics as a determining facet of her sexual identity. This rejection was also signaled on the level of the music video for "Anaconda" in how it placed attention and value to the sexual labor of Black women within hip hop as it sought to ironize the genre's sense of masculine desire through its presentation of Black female detachment and agency from this desire. In *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, E. Francis White's discusses the "politics of respectability" – i.e. how subaltern groups have connected personal behavior with practices of resistance. These practices, as previously discussed, typically frame the social values of subaltern groups through a display of their social values as compatible with dominant in-groups.⁵⁴⁸ However, little explored in such analysis are the ways in which Black women have taken up ownership over the racialized conditions of respectability within distinct class dynamics to find alternative forms of resistance.

⁵⁴⁸ White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*, 26.

This form of politics has been attached to a constricted ability for Black women to express themselves sexually, since adopters of respectability sought to define themselves in opposition to the types of damaging stereotypes that Patricia Hill Collins has referred to as controlling images. Minaj's social media self-authoring of her body, thus, rejects these forms of respectability politics by calling out perceived double standards between Black and white women's bodies by reasserting Minaj's autonomy of her own body against these perceptions of censorship.

As such, Minaj's self-authoring of her body through her music video and social media work frames her within these longer media histories, positioning her *iteration* of the Black female body as *representative* of the political and cultural conditions that have marked performers as far back as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, as both the subject and object of media discourse. In drawing attention to different cultural reactions between white and Black female bodies, Minaj frames the social significance of her own stardom through a notion of cultural censorship that restricts her access to sexual self-expression. This organization of the Black female body as the subject and object of cultural censorship by moralizing forms of respectability politics is framed further through the incorporation of the song's remixing of "Baby Got Back." This remixing illustrates Minaj's own attempted intervention in hip hop's visual representation of the Black female body, a genre already polemicized through racialized readings of rap music's violence towards women.

To understand the affective potential of this media address, it requires a specific attention to how fans and audiences take star texts as the raw materials to *feel* their potential as *and* for individuals within social groups. This reading of "Anaconda" has been borne out by the fans of Minaj who help illustrate the critical directions of Minaj's public rhetoric. In some fan accounts, one Tumblr user, "sunrise-and-sleeplessness," valued the music video for its flaunting of female sexual standards. Other fans echoed this attunement to the potential of Minaj's images and lyrics

to critique and modify histories of social representation. “Sunrise-and-sleeplessness” saw the video’s images of bodies as empowering, the product of sexualization with “no men involved.”⁵⁴⁹ This user also esteemed Minaj’s work in relation to other songs in popular media culture, specifically in opposition to “Blurred Lines.” This user’s juxtaposition of these songs is intriguing because it signals how the structured address of popular culture by female stars presents a comparative framework around media representation that translates to—some but not all—audiences without taking up the failed political correctness of Minaj in a political or social vacuum, rather understanding her cultural output within a range of media texts. To this point, another user, “highly-quinn,” praised Minaj’s disruption of normative body standards to articulate the solace she found in “Anaconda” from the lyrics, “He can tell I ain’t missing no meals,” since the user expressed, “not once in *my entire life* (my emphasis) have I been told that I deserve to eat.” While these responses did not necessarily center the racial discourse on bodies within the music video and lyrics, these comments raise our attention to how Minaj’s body and its juxtaposition against sonic lyrics reorient an experience of the spectator’s body and how much an imagined history of the body comes to the fore of viewing in these moments of reception.

While these readings of the video pose a corroboration of the Birmingham School for how audiences offer resistant or negotiated readings of sexual and racial stereotyping in the music industry, it also emphasizes how the structuring forms and discourses of celebrity bodies become co-opted into the narratives that produce the entity we know as ‘our selves.’ For this reason, it is important that we attune our analysis to the genre of pop music as one place in which our culture actively considers and redeems—though not unilaterally—the previous constructions of various

⁵⁴⁹ Sunrise-and-sleeplessness, “Blurred Lines v. Anaconda,” *Tumblr*, August 31, 2014, <http://sunrise-and-sleeplessness.tumblr.com/post/96287280319/blurred-lines-a-song-that-supports-and-embodies>

social identities represented in media culture through the imagined constructions of norms and their perceived violations. Such a framing heightens our attention to the modern diva's body as a visual and sonic discourse that is itself contextually understood within a segment of its audience as a historical object of media representation. In this way, such performances of self-objectification are framed by media production and other promotional texts as producing historical work on our senses of female representation.

Significantly, this performative re-claiming of the female body as an avatar for the history of female representation reflects the ways in which the modern diva commodity has drawn on the foundations of the diva as an activist figure from her traditions in popular music of the 1920s. In the 1980s, the modern diva worked to re-stage her body against traditions of anti-urbanism in ways that re-figured the geographies of urban and suburban space within national culture. Investing in urban space as the site for women's sexual exploration and liberation drew on feminist literary devices of consciousness-raising in films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*. The representation of divas within this context constantly referred to their own historicity either through recognition of their performance against a variety of racial boundaries or against the gendered boundaries of domesticity. Such branding and publicity rhetoric worked to envision the modern diva's promise as a figure of empowerment, often working to re-claim ideologies of musicianship in pop music by re-figuring promotional media forms like the music video as the object of significant cultural expression following cultural backlashes to a variety of civil rights movements since the 1970s. Within this context, the modern diva reflected new opportunities for contesting traditional ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality amidst Reagan-era fears about teen pregnancy and inner-city crime.

While critics often attempted to suggest that music culture represented a kind of social violence against women, their critiques frequently missed the ways in which such performances of sexuality, particularly by female performers, often sought to reclaim the subject of women's sexuality by drawing on imagined histories of female representation. The pioneering of female address on MTV worked, often, by synthesizing 1980s racial and sexual fears. Female performers reclaiming urban space is made more meaningful when considering the historical roots about urban fears of women's mobility and new mediums like cinema that had permeated the sex panic around "white slavery" in the 1910s. By understanding how the diva has come to negotiate some of these persisting divides, the development of a crossover, youth-culture oriented diva shows how the strategies and ideologies of cultural uplift that were identified in Chapter One came to be undone, challenged, and resisted within the context of the late 20th-century, where new formulations of social politics, rooted partly in pro-queer, anti-racist, and feminist cultural sentiment, became part of the lingua franca of female celebrity on MTV and subsequently thereafter. Within this context, such ideologies of social tolerance and entrepreneurial self-ownership would mark the forms of public address of the diva within the context of VH1's *Divas Live*. In the following chapter, I look to examine how the diva's branded audience in the figure of the gay fan has worked to queer ideologies of consumption such that the diva commodity has intensified her signification of queer belonging and citizenship for not only queer audiences but their consumer allies. Through this lens, the following chapters trace the ways that the contestation over the diva commodity form that had produced the frictions of diva celebrity in the MTV era would continue developing in ways that highlight how music culture came to intensify its address towards shifting and contested national ideologies of citizenship. In the last chapter, I end by tracking how the diva's implicit

feminism has been made compatible with the gendering of new forms of class domination under neoliberalism.

Chapter Four: Industrializing Diva Worship: Audience Formations, Gay Fans, and Queering Consumption

In May 2010, the recording artist Greyson Chance, then around 12, appeared on Ellen DeGeneres's syndicated talk-show for NBCUniversal to discuss his recent viral video.⁵⁵⁰ The media, uploaded to YouTube in April of that year, features Chance singing Lady Gaga's hit-single "Paparazzi" (2009) for his Oklahoma middle school's chorus night.⁵⁵¹ Focused on a close-up of Chance against the all-female backdrop of his classmates, the four-minute clip displays the teenager's impressive vocal and piano talents, while featuring the shaky camera work that serves as a visual marker of its supposed authenticity as a home video. Following being published on YouTube, the video would serve as an example of an early form of a viral meme on social media. The video itself found its way to the American public from YouTube through a variety of web and social media portals from *Yahoo! Music* to *The Huffington Post*.⁵⁵² Coverage by these digital press outlets reflected the ways in which new forms of media consumption had shifted in the late 2000s, as the video also made its way onto the Twitter accounts of Ryan Seacrest, Ellen DeGeneres, and Ashton Kutcher before Chance's appearance on the talk show.⁵⁵³ While the video demonstrates the somewhat banal themes of viral content on social media over the past decade and a half – i.e.,

⁵⁵⁰ Greyson Chance, "Greyson Chance on Ellen!," YouTube Video, 7:55, Greyson Chance, May 15, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHXo7aCnjM4>.

⁵⁵¹ Greyson Chance, "Greyson Chance Singing Paparazzi," YouTube video, 3:37, Greyson Chance, April 28, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxDIC7YV5is>.

⁵⁵² See: "13-Year-Old's 'Paparazzi' Cover Woos the Ladies," *The Huffington Post*, May 11, 2010, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/13-year-olds-paparazzi-co_n_571836; Lyndsey Parker, "Little Lord Gaga: Greyson Michael Chance's 'Paparazzi' is a Web Sensation," *Yahoo! Music*, May 11, 2010, <http://new.music.yahoo.com/blogs/videogaga/39067/little-lord-gaga-greyson-michael-chances-paparazzi-is-a-web-sensation>.

⁵⁵³ See: Ryan Seacrest, "u cant really go wrong singing @ladygaga with a @justinbieber haircut: <http://bit.ly/9ZzKLR>," Twittert, May 11, 2010, <https://twitter.com/RyanSeacrest/status/13806833060>; Ellen DeGeneres, "Never been more excited to have someone on my show. This is a 12-year-old 6th grader. He'll be on Thursdays show. Enjoy <http://bit.ly/bAjxC1>," Twitter, May 11, 2010, <https://twitter.com/TheEllenShow/status/13806721331>; Ashton Kutcher, "Watch the 1 girl in the back row that realizes she's witnessing a future superstar in the making AMAZING-> <http://bit.ly/b8Ie3M>," Twitter, May 11, 2010, <https://twitter.com/aplusk/status/13827306741>.

its thematizing of social media stardom around a democratic rhetoric of everydayness and the ways in which pop divas have come to operate as figures of self-expression – this talk show moment illustrates a significant dynamic in the longstanding promotional history of the diva and her relationship to her fans, as it became transposed into the new digital conditions of celebrity.

To this point, DeGeneres asked Chance, while on air, about his appreciation of Lady Gaga to which he responded: “Well, she’s probably my number one inspiration because I love how she’s so different and she takes her individuality and she takes an amazing talent that she has and just makes great songs that are catchy and they will make you want to dance.”⁵⁵⁴ By this point, Lady Gaga had already come to occupy a certain perception as challenging, though not dismantling, traditional performances of gender in celebrity culture; as well, she had already foregrounded an explicit appeal to the LGBTQ community with the release of her single “Alejandro” (2009), predating her oft-mentioned LGBTQ-anthem “Born This Way” (2011) by almost two years.⁵⁵⁵ Interestingly, the talk show experience focused on none of these potential readings of Chance’s fandom through his act of covering the iconoclastic singer.⁵⁵⁶ In retrospect, the interview is not particularly subtle as an example of cultural branding within systems of corporate media promotion within which the daytime talk show remains particularly valuable as a source for disseminating information about upcoming commercial releases. Chance’s answers, further, can be said to

⁵⁵⁴ Chance, “Greyson Chance on Ellen!”

⁵⁵⁵ At the National Equality March in Washington, D.C., Lady Gaga spoke out against the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy: Obama, I know you are listening. Are you listening? We will continue to push you and your administration to bring your words of promise to a reality. We need change now. We demand actions now. ... As a woman in pop music, as a woman with the most beautiful gay fans in the whole world to do my part, I refuse to accept any misogynistic and homophobic behavior in music, lyrics, or actions in the music industry.” See: Lady Gaga, “LadyGaga@National Equality Rally,” C-Span, October 11, 2009, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4417527/user-clip-lady-gaga-national-equality-rally>.

⁵⁵⁶ In fact, Greyson Chance would later disclose his gay identity in an Instagram post in 2017, nearly seven years after his interview with DeGeneres. In 2019, he would re-appear on *Ellen* to discuss his coming out experience as part of the promotion for his new record, “Shut Up.” See: Greyson Chance, “One of Greyson Chance’s Fans Inspired Him to Come Out,” YouTube Video, 3:48, The Ellen Show, April 4, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNiAqI_GfVk.

“perform” the general banter of talk show interviews. On this point, the pre-teen talked at length about his self-penned song “Broken Hearts,” that drew on his *personal* experience of heartbreak. Ellen, in her response, worked to brand audience perceptions of Chance as desirable in the long tradition of the teen heart-throb, using a blow-up of one of the video’s images to remark how the young girls in his class have self-apparently fallen in love with him as he performs. Almost two weeks later, Greyson Chance would return to the program and perform his previously teased “Broken Hearts” single, a recognition, perhaps, of social media as a new pipeline of talent for the cultural industries following DeGeneres’s season judging the talent-competition *American Idol*.

In his first appearance, Lady Gaga herself called into the show as a surprise for Chance and offered the new teen star words of encouragement to follow his dream with focused hard work. Strangely, she also encouraged him to stay away from girls, echoing the extension of a disciplined heterosexuality around Chance’s stardom while paralleling popular wisdom about the dangers of a rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. Following this interview, Chance would become one of the first artists signed to DeGeneres’s short-lived record label, eleveneleven, a subsidiary of Geffen/Interscope.⁵⁵⁷ Illustrating long-standing dynamics of music promotion on television, this interview brings into focus the competing but mutual interests of the cultural producers involved from Greyson Chance’s desire to ‘break’ into the industry to Ellen DeGeneres’s production of heart-warming content for her talk show audience and her subsequent equity in Chance’s music career to the self-

⁵⁵⁷ In a somewhat retrospective glance, the name of the label, though it would meet its demise in 2012, appears to be a reference to “11:11,” a time looked upon as a sign of good favor, encouraging hopeful clock-watchers to “make a wish.” This element of celebrity as wish or dream-fulfillment can be observed in the types of decisions the label made in terms of who it would represent. The label focused on sourcing YouTube talent like Greyson Chance, as well as Savannah Robinson and Charlie Puth, who were all promoted and featured on DeGeneres’s talk show. The record label itself featured an element of crowdsourcing and democratic voting in terms of its talent selection, as individuals were featured on the website for audiences to provide their input. See: “Ellen DeGeneres, Prime Time’s Top-Earning Woman, is on a roll, with her new enterprise eleveneleven and its shining stars, Greyson Chance and Tom Andrews,” *WowElle*, September 20, 2010, <http://wowe.com/2010/09/20/ellen-degeneres-prime-times-top-earning-woman-is-on-a-roll-with-her-new-enterprise-eleveneleven-and-its-shining-stars-greyson-chance-and-tom-andrews>.

promotional work of Lady Gaga in showing her support for a fan who helped promote her own music digitally. As many scholars have rightly pointed to the lens of participatory engagement as a new centering logic of how media is positioned to its audience, images of fandom represented in the media offer critical examples of how networks of signification are amplified around music celebrity in general and, for the purposes of my study, diva celebrity in particular. Moreover, through these images, long-standing histories about the branded nature of diva celebrity and the equally branded nature of their audience are brought into mutual relief. Such images of fandom illustrate the ways in which perceptions of authenticity and self-hood have been anchored around the diva, a dynamic that is productive for understanding more modern forms of participatory fandom as they coalesce around issues of gay identity, particularly in the case of Lady Gaga.

Throughout this dissertation, my analysis has been focused on the various ideological projects through which female pop stars have constructed and negotiated their bodies as the subject and object of not just public fascination but as artists who represent a political and cultural imagination of the United States. As I have repeatedly shown, these divas are women whose industrial discourses of cultural uplift illustrate their value as public individuals and work to position themselves as embodiments of deep social truths and avatars for various social and political groups. In these previous chapters, my emphasis on the determinations of artists seeking to define and communicate their own self-representation reflects the implicit bias of popular and academic studies of identity and media to take up a correlative relationship of the performer's gender identity as the locus of their mainstream political interests. While these engagements have traditionally posited that the diva takes on her own sense of representativeness *for her own* social group (i.e. Madonna and her relationship to (white) feminism, Nicki Minaj and her relationship to Black feminism), counter traditions within this lineage indicate how contemporary divas from the

period of the 1960s onward have also positioned themselves in terms of being avatars for (typically white) gay male sexualities and politics.⁵⁵⁸

In covering this terrain, this chapter recognizes the promotional labor of female artists to exploit personal narratives and identities as part of their array of fan management practices. Chapter Four, “Industrializing Diva Worship,” continues in this direction to consider how images of fandom render and systematize the legibility of the diva in terms of gay sexual identities and audience formations. Pivotal to this landscape is an examination of how various performers have discursively constructed and disciplined their fandoms through these textual, branding practices. Following this emphasis, I investigate the various ways in which fandom is organized and constituted, to quote Mel Stanfill, “as a concept proliferating in the internet era.”⁵⁵⁹ Stanfill’s book-length study seeks to understand how the cultural industries have domesticated fandom by interrogating how audiences are organized by the media that they consume. In turning to this history, Stanfill’s work invites us to examine, “What ideals, assumptions, and norms animated media industry engagement with fans as they turned toward them with the rise of the internet?”⁵⁶⁰ Stanfill’s work follows the direction of new trends in fan studies scholarship that examine fandom in a digitally networked society. In “The Future of Fandom,” Henry Jenkins advises:

⁵⁵⁸ Here, I appeal to the general conditions of the 1950s through the 1970s as a period of great social and political transformation around racial, gendered, and sexual lines. At various points in this chapter, I use “post-Stonewall” to mark a pre-and-post understanding of gay and queer activism around the Stonewall Riots, a queer protest that was not the first of its kind, as Los Angeles and San Francisco experienced early incidents of queer protest during this period. Marc Stein, among others, has challenged the descriptive capacity of this term for the difficulty of creating sustainable arguments about how the riots at Stonewall led to significant social change on issues of gay, queer, and trans rights, identity groups who *still* must advocate for protection under the law. While this term is used for the purposes of expressive clarity, I do have resistance to the term, similarly, over the neatness of such a descriptor, particularly in how Stonewall has come to function as a certain kind of commercial mythology for queer activism in the 1950s and 1970s. This legacy also frequently shrouds divergent political views from this period between radicals and reformers, as well as divergences between various racial, gender, and class social groups. See: Marc Stein, *The Stonewall Riots: A Documentary History* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 16.

⁵⁵⁹ Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*, (Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2019), 3.

⁵⁶⁰ Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, 7.

We should no longer be talking about fans as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate... Media companies act differently today because they have been shaped by the increased visibility of participatory culture: they are generating new kinds of content and forming new kinds of relationships with their consumers.⁵⁶¹

This chapter pursues this line of questioning by considering what new norms animate media industry engagement between female music artists and their gay fans, through the lens of diva celebrity as an industrial practice of representing and branding gay fandom.

By examining how images of fandom are represented in diva-aligned media, I put into dialogue a range of issues that the diva's stardom makes legible around the conditions of fandom as a form of self-expression and its social systems of signification by textual and performance practices of branding like celebrity interviews, TV guest appearances, and concert DVDs among many examples. As Daniel Cavicchi notes, "the basic practices associated with fandom – idealized connection with a star, strong feelings of memory and nostalgia, use of collecting to develop a sense of self, for example – precede the development of electronic "mass communication technologies.""⁵⁶² Cavicchi dates the emergence of music listening culture and fandom to at least the nineteenth-century where listeners relied on their personal diaries to extend their memory and experience of concertgoing, a practice that holds obvious parallels for contemporary social media.⁵⁶³ Tracing three waves of gay diva worship, this chapter seeks to understand how the modern pop star has crystallized such themes of self-expression and authentic difference while symbolizing the heights of commercial industry whose intellectual property, particularly in figures

⁵⁶¹ Henry Jenkins, "The Future of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, C. Harrington (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 362.

⁵⁶² Daniel Cavicchi, "Loving Music: Listeners, Entertainments, and the Origins of Music Fandom in Nineteenth-Century America," *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediate1d World*, 236.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 242-44.

like Cher, have spawned a number of derivative media properties and licensing agreements for their celebrity brands centered around their status as types of avatars for the gay market.

Modern versions of these market relationships matter as they put into relief how diva worship encourages consumption practices through ideologies of citizenship. This dynamic, in particular, is made all the more economically valuable in the contemporary conditions of social media in which cultural producers identify audience marketing labor as necessary within this environment. The intermeshing of cultural consumption and self-expression follows a whole host of scholarship that explores the issues of authenticity, branding, and identity in digital culture.⁵⁶⁴ But moreover, it reflects the tertiary effects of a cultural landscape in which consumption is privileged and disciplined through paratextual, promotional texts as a facilitation and expression of the self. This fostering of self-hood through consumption and diva worship is inscribed through longer histories of the ways in which political and cultural fault-lines have re-invigorated models of celebrity fandom within popular music. This circumstance, born out of the conditions of the post-Stonewall moment, has readily influenced the promotional aspects of celebrity performance on social media platforms themselves. By acknowledging how fandom has drawn recourse to political and cultural categories, our reading of diva worship reveals the significance of new audience formations in the aftermath of struggles over queer politics and representation that marked the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, this attention to how modes of attachment with pop stars are defined and industrialized through diva branding in popular music's visual culture allows us

⁵⁶⁴ See: Michael Serazio, "Branding Politics: Emotion, Authenticity, and the Marketing Culture of American Political Communication," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2017): 225-241; Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Self-Branding in Web 2.0* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, "Self-Branding, 'Micro-Celebrity' and the Rise of Social Media Influencers," *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2017): 191-208.

to further understand the variety of mechanisms through which identity – here, figured as gay sexual identity – is articulated through shifting media technologies and audiences.

Branding the Diva's Fandom: Histories of Queer Relational Labor

While scholars like Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald have widely positioned our attention to celebrity as a process of image-production, one cannot help but wonder how this notion of the star-image is instructive for understanding specific types of fan images within the expanding global reach of the diva.⁵⁶⁵ How did the image of the gay fan become such a recurrent one within the figure of diva celebrity? Now a fixture in the branding media of the diva, these images, in some sense, can be considered in terms of the self-authoring practices of the pop star in which the visibility of the subcultural diva takes on renewed terms of cultural visibility for a gay audience. If these images, consistent with the overall commercialization of gay consumerism from the 1980s onward, offer evidence of a neoliberal recontextualization of identity via the marketplace, this history provides critical sites in which the representation of homosexuality via fandom illustrates the shifting terms of public categories like identity.⁵⁶⁶ In this rhetoric, the diva positions

⁵⁶⁵ See: Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London, UK: BFI, 1998), 34. Dyer writes, “Looking at stars as a social phenomenon indicates that, no matter where one chooses to put the emphasis in terms of the stars' place in the production/consumption dialectic of the cinema, that place can still only be fully understood ideologically. The questions, 'Why stardom?' and 'Why such-and-such a star?', have to be answered in terms of ideology - ideology being, as it were, the terms in which the production/consumption dialectic is articulated.” See also: Paul McDonald, *The Star System* (London, UK: Wallflower Press, 2000), 5. McDonald writes, “Stars are not just images. Stars are people who work in the film industry and as such they form a part of the labour force of film production. The role of the star in the industry is not, however, only confined to their function in the process of filmmaking. In a commercial cinema such as Hollywood, stars are important to the processes of production (making films) but also distribution (selling and marketing films) and exhibition (showing films to paying audiences). ... In this circuit of commercial exchange, the star therefore becomes a form of capital, that is to say a form of asset deployed with the intention of gaining advantage in the entertainment market and making profits.”

⁵⁶⁶ See: Katherine Sender, “Queens for a Day: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the Neoliberal Project,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2006): 131-151.

understandings of being a gay or queer outsider as coterminous with the female experiences of media surveillance in the cultural industries.

In recent years, fan studies scholars have made important critical interventions into audience studies through a rigorous examination of the intersections between media, affect, and identity. Focusing on music fans in particular, scholars including Nancy Baym (2007; 2018), Lucy Bennett (2012; 2013; 2014), Daniel Cavicchi (1998; 2014; 2017), Mark Duffett (2013; 2017), Patryk Galuszka (2014), Erika Doss (1999), and Fred Vermorel (1985) have explored the array of social, cultural, and political factors related to the organization of audiences into media communities.⁵⁶⁷ For the above scholars, recuperating this history of fans in music in contravention of earlier studies of listening cultures signaled by the Frankfurt School, follows Daniel Cavicchi's impulse "to think about the *work*, rather than *worth*, of fandom, what it *does*, not what it *is*, for various people in particular historical and social moments."⁵⁶⁸

In the recording of *The Monster Ball at Madison Square Garden* released for HBO in 2011, the performer Lady Gaga uses her concert monologues to draw on this outsider-status by gathering

⁵⁶⁷ Nancy K. Baym, "The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom," *First Monday*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (2007); Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*; Lucy Bennett, "Music Fandom Online: REM Fans in Pursuit of the Ultimate First Listen," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 5: (2012): 748-763; Lucy Bennett, "'If We Stick Together We Can Do Anything': Lady Gaga Fandom, Philanthropy and Activism Through Social Media," *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (2013): 1-15; Lucy Bennett, "Tracing Textual Poachers: Reflections on the Development of Fan Studies and Digital Fandom," *The Journal of Fandom*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2014): 5-20; Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998); Daniel Cavicchi, "Fandom Before 'Fan': Shaping the History of Enthusiastic Audiences," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2014): 52-72; Nancy Baym, Daniel Cavicchi, and Norma Coates, "Music Fandom in the Digital Age: A Conversation," *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (London, UK: Routledge, 2017); Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Mark Duffett, "Directions in Music Fan Research: Undiscovered Territories and Hard Problems," *Fan Identities and Practices in Context: Dedicated to Music*, ed. Mark Duffett (London, UK: Routledge, 2017); Patryk Galuszka, "New Economy of Fandom," *Popular Music & Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2015): 25-43; Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Fred Vermorel and Judy Vermorel, *Starlust: The Secret Life of Fans* (London, UK: W.H. Allen, 1985).

⁵⁶⁸ Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 9.

discourses of ethnic difference, misogynistic theater environments, and queer celebrity identification. In one moment, she recounts her experience at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where her teachers told her:

And you know, you're never gonna play the heroine and you're never gonna play the blonde, you're never gonna play the ingenue, you'll never play the main character, you'll never be the star. Because you have dark hair and you're too ethnic.⁵⁶⁹

To which Gaga responded, "What about Liza [Minnelli]?"⁵⁷⁰ This story draws historically on critical understandings of film stardom from earlier decades – popularly identifiable by the trope of the blonde bombshell as Hollywood star – in which Gaga's coded Italian facial features are viewed as outside the perimeters of film glamor, particularly as such an ideal has been embodied by Hollywood's most glamorous stars as Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, and Kim Novak. Moreover, the drawing upon Liza Minnelli, in the lineage of her mother Judy Garland as a gay cult figure, seems purposeful when compared to other moments in the concert. Through such rhetoric, Gaga can be said to distinguish her celebrity within the context of Hollywood's mass-media address by drawing upon queer cult figures as Liza Minelli for her role in *Cabaret* (1972) among others.

Crucially, this comparison would be a critical point of fan branding. On the bonus features of the concert DVD, Lady Gaga can be seen meeting Liza Minnelli who responds to Gaga's story of being a female outsider, "you can play the heroine... Listen you're doing everything right."⁵⁷¹ Moments later in the bonus footage, a gay fan walks up to Lady Gaga and describes his affection

⁵⁶⁹ *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden*, DVD, Directed by Laurieann Gibson (USA: HBO Entertainment, 2011).

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*

for the singer's themes of self-acceptance that have helped him in the process of coming out. Filmed nearly half a decade before the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Lady Gaga positions her career's narrative in terms of both queerness and cultural visibility: "Well, you know, I feel like that too, you know. I have had days, and sometimes I don't feel like I could be myself. And you guys remind me why, you know, why I'm here."⁵⁷² This relationship of being a female outsider and being an avatar for a certain sense of queer cult sexuality is one way in which Gaga's stardom positions her deviant female stardom as homologous to gay sexual identity in branding the performer as a figure of social empowerment and self-acceptance. In some senses, this homology represents the ways in which the language of social change via self-acceptance has offered a valuable and potent rhetoric for divas precisely as they shape the images and identities of their gay fandom within a broader media ecosystem. While the diva's stardom, in particular, can illustrate historical tensions between political approaches rooted in gay respectability (à la the homophile movement and the fight for access to institutions like the military and marriage) and more radical ones (i.e. the fight against heterosexuality as a coercive force in society), it is important to consider the historical, industrial, and cultural development of these images of fans as representative of the commodification of queer acceptance that positions investment in the marketplace as a site for extra-political social representation.

In this discussion of the diva's branding through representations of sexual identity, my work alludes to Dallas W. Smythe's work on audiences as a particular type of commodity. Smythe's formulation of the audience commodity, though not without its own problems, works to unsettle dominant accounts in what he identifies as bourgeois and Marxist approaches to the political economy of media for how they define the principal product of the mass media in terms

⁵⁷² *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour*.

of its content.⁵⁷³ This tradition, as Smythe identifies it, features critical descriptions of mass media through language like “messages,” “information,” “images,” “meaning,” “entertainment,” “education,” “orientation,” and “manipulation.”⁵⁷⁴ In contrast, Smythe’s version of the “audience commodity,” which can be observed in Henry Jenkins et al. and Christian Fuchs’s separate works,⁵⁷⁵ relies on the understanding that the principal function of commercial mass media within a capitalist system is:

To set an agenda for the production of consciousness with two mutually reinforcing objectives: (1) to mass market the mass-produced consumer goods and services generated by monopoly capitalism by using audience power to accomplish this end; (2) to mass market legitimacy of the state and its strategic and tactical policies and actions, such as election of government officers, military thrusts against states which show signs of moving toward socialism (Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, Chile, Dominican Republic, etc.), and policies against youthful dissent (“Middle America”).⁵⁷⁶

Moving from the underpinnings of this argument, Smythe’s work makes perceptible the idea of constructing the diva’s audience as its own kind of commodity in the forging of relationships between particular audiences and cultural commodities in an environment in which the diva commodity has intensified its expansion into digital music, advertising sponsorships on social media, and new emphases on live touring.

⁵⁷³ Dallas W. Smythe, “On the Audience Commodity and Its Work,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 230-256.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁷⁵ See: Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013); Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA and London, UK: Sage, 2014).

⁵⁷⁶ Smythe, “On the Audience Commodity and Its Work,” 233.

To this end, the negotiation of intimacy through acts of publicity, thus, positions the diva as a quite familiar and grounded creature of the media environment, as she *labors* to connect intimately with her fans for the purposes of creating and growing her audience through what Nancy K. Baym has referred to as “relational labor.”⁵⁷⁷ Moreover, this version of the audience commodity also underscores a specific dimension about the rise of narrowcasting media from the transformations in television from the late 1970s through the 1990s. The fracturing of mass audiences into various consumer demographics can be observed in the rise of such demographically-targeted magazines that offered new forms of advertising around a shared cultural positioning through identity-based targeting of audiences around race, gender, and sexuality (and, as consumer magazines, implicitly class).⁵⁷⁸ These magazines, importantly, would also represent a formalization of the types of informational circuits that existed in non-professionalized print operations. A critical observation to make within this landscape is the ways in which the content of such magazines and narrowcasted media created demands on cable networks like MTV, VH1, Oxygen, and Bravo to effectively brand themselves in relation to their targeted audiences.⁵⁷⁹ These demands have been sated largely by building an array of relationships

⁵⁷⁷ Writing before the publication of her book that explores this term further, Baym observes, “*relational labor*, by which I mean regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work. . . . As in most fields, musicians’ social and economic relationships have always been intertwined. However, the shift to media that enable continuous interaction, higher expectations of engagement, and greater importance of such connections in shaping economic fortunes calls for new skills and expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries.” See: Nancy K. Baym, “Connect with Your Audience! The Relational Labor of Connection,” *The Communication Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015): 16.

⁵⁷⁸ For further discussion of this parceling of media into lifestyle or identity-groups, see: Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 29.

⁵⁷⁹ This assumption characterizes traditional approaches to cable TV, though it has been complicated by scholars like Jennifer Fuller, among others. See: Jennifer Fuller, “Branding Blackness on US Cable Television,” *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2010): 286-87. Fuller writes, “It is easy to be swept away by the promise of cable. The dominant discourse about the medium is that it is innovative, responsive to viewer desires, and offers high-quality programming that challenges viewers. Cable does indeed do all of the above, but that discourse only covers part of cable’s offerings and privileges a certain kind of viewer; the parallel discourse, that broadcasting is homogeneous and staid, is equally partial. It is important to recognize that this is also cable’s own industrial discourse, as epitomized by the HBO marketing slogan ‘It’s Not TV, It’s HBO’. Cable’s discourse of ‘risk’ is a seductive one for viewers, television producers, entertainment journalists and scholars, who often praise the

to cultural producers and authentic brands that would effectively capture the imagination of distinct consumer groups like the LGBTQ community. These strategies reflect, in part, the late-20th-century's preoccupation with underexplored consumer demographics.⁵⁸⁰ Through such branding practices, identification with the diva represents, in some senses, entrenched ideologies of the cultural marketplace as a venue for representation with distinct opportunities to combat LGBTQ discrimination by exploiting this queer visibility. In some senses, this history should be understood in terms of what we might call a "queer uplift" to illustrate how older ideologies of the diva commodity, reflected in Chapter One, play out within the venue of post-Stonewall media culture in the U.S.

The state of identity politics in media production invites the very question that Sarah Banet-Weiser has tracked so effectively in her work considering the nature of consumption in advanced capitalism:

We also must consider the equally important, but more abstract, notion of what constitutes a commodity in the first place. Is racial or gender identity a commodity? Can the pursuit of social justice be commodified? If the answer to these and similar questions is yes, what does that mean for individuals, institutions, and politics?⁵⁸¹

narrative complexity and innovation of cable's most-touted programs. 2 The discourses of cable 'quality' and 'risk' were particularly alluring at a moment when minority representation on the major networks was limited, while there was a broader scope of minority representations on cable channels. ... Blackness has been important to how cable channels market themselves, not only to black viewers, but to predominantly white audiences, including upscale 'quality' viewers and the youth demographic."

⁵⁸⁰ At the same time, this identification of identity-themed programming, as Katherine Sender has observed, is not always positioned in terms of the audience represented in the programming, as in the example of Bravo, Sender notes, the gay audience was put into a secondary position in pursuance of the female demographic aged 18 to 49. See: Katherine Sender, "Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences," in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 302-318.

⁵⁸¹ Banet-Weiser, "Branding Consumer Citizens," *AuthenticTM*, 20.

While Banet-Weiser does not include the issue of sexual identity within her study, her emphases do much to organize the themes and analyses contained within this chapter, precisely as it calls us to interrogate the ways in which the audience itself becomes branded through the representational categories of authentic marketing and media production. Here, I hope to highlight the ways in which claims of media representativeness work to align audience identification with market studies of social demography. Flowing from this aim, this chapter asks what significance the gay or queer fan has as its own type of branded image for the diva. Tracking the development of this queer branding of the diva's public allows us to understand the history of sexual politics in the U.S. media industries. More than this, however, this dynamic illustrates how acceptance towards gay sexual identities, in particular, has migrated into being a central way in which modern American culture has sought to answer foundational questions around the authenticity and politics of consumption.

To address these questions, I examine the development of the 'gay fan' at three distinct historical moments within the visual culture of the diva. These moments, to be clear, are significant for how they mark new stages of media production in its relationship to gay sexual identity and its active role in constructing the branded publics of the diva since the 1960s. Crucial to each of these moments is the way that technological shifts have intensified themes of cultural citizenship through the language of media visibility:

- Firstly, I examine issues of the mass audience in relation to gay representation in the mid-20th-century. This era was marked by the presumption of a homogeneous, undifferentiated audience by media like radio, film, and broadcast TV. Within this landscape, the subcultural meanings of certain stars and cultural commodities entailed a process of negotiation, as well as a displacement of the recognition of a gay audience from the media

text to the act of cultural criticism, a dynamic particularly illustrated by the case of Judy Garland who came to function as her own kind of public oddity in the press for these gay fans. It is this period that would auger much of the critical terminologies and narratives still with us today about the cultural visibility of gay subjects through their displacement onto examples of women defined, in some senses, by their excess in figures like Garland (and relatedly other cult figures like Mae West). Moreover, this history, crucially, is informed by not only Hollywood's central position within the cultural industries but *also* the Hollywood Production Code's prohibition on what it termed "sex perversion," thus, implicitly, narrowing the field of critical discussion to issues of visibility (i.e. what can be screened) rather than a more outwardly political interrogation of *how* such subjects are represented.

- Secondly, I explore the developments in media promotion around niche marketing due to the rise of lifestyle magazines such as *The Advocate* (originally *The Los Angeles Advocate*) that allowed for contained addresses by female celebrities like Bette Midler and Cher to address a gay public specifically. Moreover, the rise of cable television afforded new terms of representation for gay subjects and figures in the media, while new cultural programming brought shifts in the consumer demographics found desirable by broadcast networks like NBC throughout the 1990s. As Ron Becker and others have shown, the decline of a mass audience within broadcast TV of the 1990s, though still lucrative as a medium, worked to recalibrate the address of network television with a renewed emphasis on the Socially Liberal Urban-Minded Professional class (what Becker calls the "Slumpy" audience) that led to such programs as *Will & Grace* (1998—2004; 2017-2020). It is in this context, built around new mappings of sexuality through televisual consumption, where

divas like Janet Jackson, Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, and Cher appeared as guest-stars in various capacities that appeared to call attention to the brand relationships between gay-themed programming and divas.⁵⁸² In many ways, this media dynamic is one that persists into our historical present. This period, further, includes the rise of Bravo as a cable network that featured a niche address around gay-themed programming that took up diva worship and celebrity as part of its brand. This dynamic can be evidenced by the recurring use of Cher in the stand-up material of the network's primary star in its early period, Kathy Griffin, whose work in *My Life on the D-List* (2005-2010) played out, somewhat parodically and quite seriously, fascination with the diva and her brand-work through the language of survivalism and self-endurance in the media industry.

- Thirdly, I examine the schema of what Sarah Banet-Weiser has elsewhere called the individuated and neoliberal labor practices of the late 20th-century and early 21st century, which has risen precisely due to the new social media technologies afforded to audience communities via platforms like Myspace, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. These venues have renewed the relational labor of the diva in negotiating, branding, and connecting to this gay public both authentically and intimately.⁵⁸³ Within this landscape, the politics around LGBTQ rights have exploded since 2008 due to both the dedicated work of LGBTQ activists *and* the increasing role that LGBTQ identities have played around the continued blurring of the boundaries between media consumption and media production by social media technologies. It is in this third period that the branding of a gay and queer fandom, such as Lady Gaga's Monster Pit Key Contest or the Born This Way Ball Foundation takes on not only larger significance within national tensions between Christian and secular

⁵⁸² Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁵⁸³ Banet-Weiser, "Branding Consumer Citizens," *AuthenticTM*, 21.

interpretations of the nation but also the value of deep, intimate relationships between the fan's self-representation in LGBTQ digital communities and the diva as a significant fan-marketing dynamic.

To be clear, these examined shifts are themselves not clearly demarcated as historical periods, as many of the mediums examined here have longer histories than what can be specifically examined within the context of this project. These three historical moments typify different relationships between media production and the branding of the audience as its own specific type of public. Rather, I track a genealogical progression of what Henry Jenkins has described as forms of “participatory culture,” a term that marks out the active forms of engagement and community facilitated in and around culture by the decreased barriers of artistic expression and civic engagement promised by both digital culture and the internet.⁵⁸⁴ Moreover, Jenkins's model of participatory culture is viewed, in part, as a corrective to even older understandings of audiences and fandom produced out of Frankfurt-school-inspired critical engagements with consumer culture. On this point, this chapter pushes back at a certain strain of optimism that has characterized fan studies approaches, following a recent spate of research represented particularly well by Mel Stanfill's *Exploiting Fandom*.⁵⁸⁵

In this chapter, I point to the enduring mythology of the diva and her relationship to the gay fan as it came to be informed not only by Judy Garland's celebrity but in her afterlives as a

⁵⁸⁴ In his introduction to the anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins, along with Suzanne Scott, works to shape a definition of participatory culture around the following axis: “As historians have turned their attention to fandom, we are starting to have a much fuller account of how a particular concept of cultural participation emerged as folk traditions met the institutions of mass culture....This long history of struggles to insure popular access to the means of cultural production and circulation can be described as the push towards participatory culture.” See: Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott, “*Textual Poachers*, Twenty Years Later: A Conversation between Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott,” in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), xxii.

⁵⁸⁵ Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*.

model of fame that took on particular resonance within the changing media conditions of the late 20th-century. Garland, to be sure, *does* offer a queer form of stardom so storied that it has encouraged and, perhaps, colonized the historical memory of the Stonewall Riots, where some sources, such as Charles Kaiser's book *The Gay Metropolis* (1997) and Roland Emmerich's film *Stonewall* (2015), have played up the influence of Garland on the rioters that fateful night.⁵⁸⁶ This myth of Garland's diva status, as it will be shown, has entered repeatedly into the types of branded mythology attached to a new wave of stars who came to fame following Garland's death and significant changes to the consumption of media and its relationship to the politics of queer visibility. At the same time, the diva's enduring legacy through new avenues of lifestyle magazines, television, and social media point not only to a transhistorical phenomenon of diva worship, but it *also* allows us to excavate the ways that various social groups, such as the LGBTQ but particularly gay community, have become translated into the commodity discourses centered by the cultural industries. And so, this chapter asks with a particular force *how does gayness, as distinct and related to queerness, figure into the new social relations of brand culture?* Acknowledging critiques of corporate "gaystreaming" that commodified gay political and social activism,⁵⁸⁷ I seek, in part, to understand how gender became the modality in which sexuality is

⁵⁸⁶ See: Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1997); *Stonewall*, DVD, Directed by Roland Emmerich (USA: Roadside Attractions, 2015).

⁵⁸⁷ See: Eve Ng, "A "Post-Gay" Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Vol. 6 (2013): 259. Countering popular traditions of understanding the mainstreaming of gay sexual identities in media as more conclusive, Ng critiques the ways that such "gaystreaming" content narrows the representability of LGBT subjects in media: "At one level, the development of gaystreaming is attributable to the success of Logo's most highly rated program, RuPaul's Drag Race, 1 in which contestants compete for the title of best drag queen, as well as to the trajectory of another cable network, NBC Universal's Bravo, on which *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was the first high-visibility success of Bravo's rebranding a couple of years before Logo's launch. While gaystreaming might seem to expand the possibilities for "LGBT interest" programming, it generally promotes a relatively narrow set of representations, however much Logo executives like to point to RuPaul's Drag Race as an exemplar of racial and sexual diversity. Besides more or less predictable commercial imperatives, gaystreaming has been spurred both by changes to conditions of television production that preceded Logo and by some integration of LGBT content and identities into mainstream American culture."

branded, acknowledging, as Kathleen McHugh does in her study of American domesticity, the ways that race, class, and gender are themselves not “an idealized mantra of discrete and self-evident differences,” but rather interpretive categories that yield “interrelated modalities” as key points of significance within the national imaginary.⁵⁸⁸

Mass Media’s Shadows of Connotation: Early Models of Gay Fandom and Its Myths:

Discussing the history of gay representation during the first half of the twentieth century necessarily requires an examination of the period of the studio system. Understandably, Classical Hollywood representation may appear to be a strange starting point for a discussion of the images of gay fans within the diva’s brand culture, but it is important crucially for how this production context sets up the terms of a mass media system in its relationship to homosexuality as an on-screen and, more importantly, off-screen subject. Moreover, there are a few other reasons that I start with this terrain. As a system of media production, there is, perhaps, no greater influence than the central role that Classical Hollywood played during its early decades and its remarkable influence in terms of talent and production strategies on the explosion of media and the development of television programming in the post-war period. These later spheres of cultural production are pivotal sites in which the development of the diva and her gay public have been advanced most concretely but would not be possible without the structures of intimacy advanced during the height of Classical Hollywood.

Hollywood film production also explicates the political stakes of homosexual spectatorship quite clearly. This early history of Hollywood features a cultural struggle over its system of production and representation most synthesized by the Hollywood Movie Picture Production Code

⁵⁸⁸ Kathleen A. McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

of 1930/1934 and its banning of “sexual perversion” within films produced and exhibited by the studio system. These circumstances were the result of judicial regulations on Hollywood’s First Amendment rights from *Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio* (1915) that posited film as commercial speech. Additionally, the Production Code represented the gains of religious activism, most usually represented by The Catholic Legion of Decency, in exerting commercial pressures on Hollywood to regulate the perceived moral dimensions of film at a moment when the sexual liberalism of Hollywood seemed to be at its height in the early 1930s. These conditions, moreover, relied on understanding filmic consumption as a critical site of civic engagement for such activists, thus also reflecting the introduction of the Production Code, in some senses, as the success of an early consumer movement around media production. These dimensions of Classical Hollywood, perhaps due to its historical remove, place the exigencies of cultural consumption as a more cleanly political act at the fore, seeming to challenge, however retrospectively, more facile assertions of mass media representation as an abstract, apolitical, or simply consumerist mode of analysis as is often alleged by reductionist critics of commercial systems of media production.

Lastly and most importantly in the terms of this study, some of the key mythologies of diva culture today are produced through the range of intertextual strategies found at the heart of Classical Hollywood’s systems of production and promotion, particularly over its negotiations of a subcultural address towards homosexual fans. One of the key mythological figures of this period, of course, is the subject of Judy Garland, whose legend is so revered by certain gay historiographies that they have labored to attribute the rise of highly-visible queer activism at Stonewall to Garland’s death, despite the difficulty of proving such assertions. Paying attention to this dimension of popular gay historiography, perhaps, instructs us of the need to distinguish between popular memory of the representation of homosexuality and its actual history of representation in

Classical Hollywood, two distinct lineages of historical interpretation that are constantly at risk of being merged due to the ways in which historical metaphors of visibility occlude, rather than reveal, rigorous examination of this material. This ideology of visibility, drawn in reference to the figuration of the closet in media and political rhetoric, has tended to de-contextualize the ways that LGBTQ studies have approached issues of media representation historically, particularly as the emergence of a gay market in the 1970s and 1980s drew on such language as the basis of their marketing rhetoric.

In referring to popular film history of homosexuality, Vito Russo's work in *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), of course, still looms large as an accessible volume and, perhaps, compendium of the forms and typologies of how homosexual prejudice became represented in classical Hollywood film.⁵⁸⁹ Drawing upon Molly Haskell's insights for feminist film criticism in *From Reverence to Rape* (1973), Russo writes:

The big lie about lesbians and gay men is that we do not exist. ... Laws were made against depicting such things onscreen. And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets. We have cooperated for a very long time in the maintenance of our own invisibility. And now the party is over.⁵⁹⁰

Russo then moves on to categorize the myriad stereotypes used to represent non-heterosexual subjects in cinema and the industrial conditions that provided for these tropes. Written in a moment before the growth of gay film historiography, Russo's work struggled, in some senses, against the lack of critical accounts of homosexual visibility in the cultural industries. Seeking to interview two hundred people for his work, the author found how pervasive these conditions of invisibility

⁵⁸⁹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1981).

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

were at the level of film production, as those in front of the camera (i.e. actors) were largely terrified and remained silent in approaching Russo, while those behind-the-camera lens (i.e. screenwriters and directors) were more willing to contribute to his study.⁵⁹¹ Critical rejections of visibility politics, in some senses, must locate the historical exigencies of this language as a by-product of earlier conditions of film censorship giving way within the context of the postwar-U.S., as forms of media expanded and provided new opportunities and new markets for media programming.

In his historiography of the conditions of homosexuality's prohibition in the cinema, Russo provides a familiar history that is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. Due to public and religious pressures that intensified after the introduction of sound (and the sexual and racial play of pre-Code films), Hollywood had agreed to self-regulate its films as acts of speech through the Motion Picture Production Code that was enforced from 1934 to 1968. Though more hesitantly published earlier in 1930, the Code was enforced by Will Hays of the industry-apparatus Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). In its naming of sensitive topics for filmic representation, homosexuality was itself barred from explicit mention, only finding reference in a couple clauses: "The sanctity of the institution and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing" and "Sex-perversion or any inference of it is forbidden."⁵⁹² Such language illustrate the ways in which Victorian mores about sexuality – including its investment in newfound regimes of population management that took up familial domestic life as the ideological unit of society – had found itself into the country's most popular entertainment of the period. These prohibitions from the MPPC have served as a

⁵⁹¹ Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, xii.

⁵⁹² "The Motion Picture Production Code," reprinted in Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 352-353.

temptation to consider the history of homosexuality and LGBTQ subjects in media as built around a system of silencing, drawing on familiar metaphors of the closet to inform an incomplete version of film historiography. In historical studies of gay media representation of which Russo is representative, there has been a tendency to center filmic content as the locus of critical studies of representation, rather than observing the cultural systems of communication and representation that Hollywood anchored.

Writing upon *The Celluloid Closet*'s thirtieth anniversary, Michael Schiavi has reflected upon the tensions involved with Russo's central influence on the development of gay film historiography. Within a certain tradition, Russo's work, Schiavi contends, has been seen as complicit in essentializing a certain understanding of gay sexuality as a fundamental aspect of identity in human relations, such as Richard Dyer's critique of Russo in his review of the book.⁵⁹³ While others, such as Robin Wood, have sought to challenge Russo for his eschewal of more theoretical paradigms, alleging that *Closet* "give us much information and little theory," seeming to echo Dyer's critique that the work lacked sophisticated structure.⁵⁹⁴ On the issue of its relationship to gender, Schiavi also highlights feminist criticism against Russo's work. While Russo considered *The Celluloid Closet* a feminist book for its discussion of changing ideas about masculinity, Martha Fleming, in her article for *Jump Cut*, challenged Russo's assertion, pointing to his reading of *Madchen in Uniform* (1931) as "one of the few films to have an inherently gay sensibility" as an example of his exclusionary outlook on the place of women within homosexual reading practices.⁵⁹⁵ These critiques, among others, have defined the persistent challenges that

⁵⁹³ Michael Schiavi, "Looking for Vito," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2009): 41-64. See: Richard Dyer, "Review Essay: Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*," *Studies in Visual Communication*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1983): 52-56.

⁵⁹⁴ Robin Wood, "Airing the Closet," *Canadian Forum* (February 1982).

⁵⁹⁵ Martha Fleming, "Looking for What Isn't There," *Jump Cut*, April 28, 1983, 59. Quoted in Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 56.

scholars have posed to Russo's work, though Schiavi's insight, for its part, does an excellent job of placing Russo's historiography within its context of 1970s Gay Liberation. In particular, Schiavi calls attention to the ways in which Russo's polemic matches the mood of his political consciousness in adulthood where homosexuality had been designated by the American Psychiatric Association as a psychiatric disorder until December 1973.⁵⁹⁶

In recognizing Russo as a representative example of this form of popular gay historiography through his use of metaphors about visibility, it is important to read his critical instincts through the oft-cited *The History of Sexuality* (1978) by Michel Foucault for its explicit theorization of the conditions of sexual censorship. True to what Foucault termed "the repressive hypothesis," dominant assumptions about the history of gay media representation in the U.S. have tended to argue through rubrics of silence or prohibition on the representation of homosexuality in the early 20th-century.⁵⁹⁷ These rubrics have largely crystallized through the heuristic of "the closet," as Russo confirms in his work's title. Written at the tail-end of the 1970s, Foucault's version of this hypothesis, which he rejects, was a familiar one to the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, particularly as it sought to instantiate its own historiography about sex. For Foucault, this historical hypothesis starts in the seventeenth century at the beginning of bourgeois society where lively expression about sex and sexuality had been previously common. Repressed, sexuality, moving from this moment, became subjugated at the level of language to "control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present."⁵⁹⁸ A culture shaped by this form of power imposed a silence over sexuality, as "modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex." Foucault,

⁵⁹⁶ Schiavi, "Looking for Vito," 54.

⁵⁹⁷ In this sense, the repressive hypothesis is a historical reading of Western history where sexuality goes from freely expressive to repressed and forbidden.

⁵⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012), 17.

importantly, intervenes in this hypothesis as he seeks to interrogate how these centuries were critical in re-framing and confining issues of sexuality to the level of discourse; i.e. what he terms “the incitement to discourse” to reflect the productivity of speech around sexuality.⁵⁹⁹ To be clear, this intervention, for Foucault, should not mute clear signs of the ways that a more explicit familiarity and vocabulary of sexuality was expunged during the post-Code period of Hollywood film or that new ideas about propriety had not affected the ability of individuals to express themselves freely and in the view of the law. Rather, Foucault’s main claim is that the preceding centuries had led to the proliferation of discourses around sexuality – i.e. namely, that sexuality should be subject to scrutiny by new forms of government power. This new regime of sexuality as an object of knowledge and governmental regulation flowed outward and intensified from the epistemologies produced by the emergence of psychoanalytic approaches to human sexuality. This medicalized discourse furnished psychiatric readings of homosexuality that intensified, for some populations, the need of controlling such forms of cultural representation through religious and middle-class investment in media regulation that culminated, partly, in the conditions of Hollywood censorship.

Flowing from Foucault’s rejection of “the repressive hypothesis,” scholars have examined the ways in which populations and social groups are managed through the structures of cultural discourse itself. Recognizing this discourse as a mode of representing queerness and the LGBTQ community is a compelling rejoinder on reductive historical studies about gay identity particularly through familiar treatments of censorship as merely a conditioning of silence. As Chon Noriega has shown, homosexuality, though not itself given filmic respectability, however, *was* represented

⁵⁹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 17.

even in the 1930s and 1940s, where the application of the code was at its most strict.⁶⁰⁰ Examining the reviews of film texts produced that involved issues of homosexuality or lesbianism in their underlying intellectual property, Noriega concludes that “reviewers engaged in a “conspiracy of silence” in the 1930s and 1940s, began to identify and condemn homosexual “overtones” and “angles” in the 1950s, and found qualified sympathy for homosexuals in the early 1960s.”⁶⁰¹ In this latter period of the 1960s, he observes a shift from issues of immorality to psychiatry in the depiction of such themes. Acknowledging the juxtaposition of these critical reviews of such film texts does much to clarify the circumstances of film censorship in its relationship to broader societal and cultural views about the issue of sexuality; and moreover, it also challenges our traditional understanding of the system of cultural censorship around sexuality in the 20th-century. Though written in 1990, this attitude in complicating Russo’s work has expanded the work of scholars writing on censorship to think more comprehensively about how the conditions of censorship impact the representation of marginalized groups as gay men (in contemporary terms).

To this point, Ellen C. Scott, though discussing the issue of African-American film and relatedly the intense friction around Black sexual desirability within the Code’s prohibition on miscegenation, has shifted theories of censorship from issues of silence and erasure to that of translation, drawing from Christian Metz’s work on censorship as, in her terms, “mechanisms of circumlocution.”⁶⁰² Scott’s work, an example of theoretically and historically informed approaches

⁶⁰⁰ Chon Noriega, ““Something’s Missing Here!” Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934-1962,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Fall 1990): 20-41.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid, 22. Noriega’s list of considered films include a number of films that were released prior to the repeal of the MPPC: *These Three* (1936), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *Crossfire*, (1947), *Pit of Loneliness* (French, 1951; released in U.S., 1954), *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *The Strange One* (1957), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), *The Children’s Hour* (1962), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), *Victim* (British, 1961; released in the U.S., 1962), *A Taste of Honey* (British, 1961; released in the U.S., 1962), and *Advise and Consent* (1962).

⁶⁰² Ellen Scott, *Cinema Civil Rights*, 3. In Metz’s work, he also describes issues of censorship in terms of translation, suggesting that repressed content often finds representation through semiological processes: “When you begin to notice how many of the problems raised in the last chapter are actually problems of *translation*, the notion of ‘censorship’ and its exact status becomes quite central to the semiological enterprise.” See: Christian Metz,

to Classical Hollywood, points to the ways in which cultural censorship controls, regulates, and produces speech, rather than serving a merely repressive or silencing function. Importantly, Scott's work joins others like Patricia White who have focused on issues of cultural representability – not representation – in her study of Lesbian spectatorship in Classical Hollywood as central when examining the implications of censorship practices as they mark forms of subjectivity for historically marginalized subjects. For White, the issue is not necessarily to think about whether sexual minorities found representation in Hollywood's mass media apparatus but rather *how* such representations were produced and what narrative strategies were used to mark such subjects as representable to a mass audience.⁶⁰³ White's answer on this question, similar to Noriega's, has been to place emphasis on the contextual networks of information that produce an audience's reading of a particular film text. To this point, Noriega's own work provides a compelling complement to these discussions for his focus on the juxtaposition of film reviews that were one way in which homosexuality was rendered visible to audiences and thereby reflects, in Foucault's phrasing, its being "put into discourse."⁶⁰⁴ Such attention to the implications of this censorship, what Noriega has identified as "authorized "subtexting"" by the press and what White has called "the regime of connotation," has been to challenge traditional hierarchies of a disciplinary emphasis on the filmic text that have historically provided for the erasure of media's material social and political contexts.⁶⁰⁵

One of the discursive legacies of Classical Hollywood, for its part, is the way in which homosexual subjects were representable within the conditions of publicity and authorized fan

"'Censorship': Barrier or Deviation," *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 253.

⁶⁰³ Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 11, quoted in Noriega, "Homosexuality and Film Reviews," 22.

⁶⁰⁵ Noriega, 35; White, *Uninvited*, xviii.

publications, particularly as they can be read as examples of early and critically significant paratexts. In his delineation of the term, Gerard Genette has described the paratext as an ancillary piece of media where:

One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its “reception” and its consumption.⁶⁰⁶

Situated as a kind of ancillary text or as Genette quotes from Philippe Lejeune “the fringe of the printed text which, in reality, controls the whole reading,” the paratextual dimensions of fan magazines offer clear ways in which the grounding of homosexual subtext in certain stars and film texts can achieve a greater level of empiricism than traditional recourses to formations of a “gay sensibility” that have largely marked both Russo’s work and critical discussions of camp as an aesthetic object.⁶⁰⁷⁶⁰⁸ This issue, particularly over critiques of a certain sexual essentialism, has amounted to a great difficulty when incorporating Russo’s work about the history of gay filmic representation into the media studies canon. In shifting the media texts of academic focus, such paratexts allude to the foregrounding of a gay sensibility empirically *rather* than gesturing through cultural vernacular at essentialist traits of gay sexual identity at work in media representations of

⁶⁰⁶ Gerald Genette and Marie Maclean, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 1991): 261.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid. Quote from Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, FR: Seuil, 1975), 45.

⁶⁰⁸ On this point, Russo writes: “People say that there can be no such thing as a “gay sensibility” because the existence of one would mean that there is a straight sensibility, and clearly there is not. But a gay sensibility can be many things; it can be present even when there is no sign of homosexuality, open or covert, before or behind the camera. Gay sensibility is largely a product of oppression, of the necessity to hide so well for so long. It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be. It was gay sensibility that, for example, often enabled some lesbians and gay men to see at very early ages, even before they knew the words for what they were, something on the screen that they knew related to their lives in some way, without being able to put a finger on it.” See: Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 92.

homosexuality. This methodological emphasis also recovers the conditions of representability under the studio system, moving away from the moralizing undertones against homosexual desire as instituted by the Production Code and looking to the ways in which fandom, for its part, constituted a form of cultural belonging for homosexual men by drawing on deviant analogies between women and gay men through psychoanalytic readings of homosexuality as gender inversion. These analogies, as they survive into the present, were a defining feature of Hollywood's version of early mass culture queer diva worship.

Recovering the role of paratextuality as a defining feature of queer representation in Classical Hollywood is to refuse historiographic binaries produced around metaphors of cultural visibility. Historically, representing homosexuality through characterization has tended to emphasize biographic details around specifically gendered traits like a taste for art and interior design, strong maternal relationships, and a lack of interest in traditionally masculine hobbies like watching sports. Acknowledging how such traits filtered into studio publicity department copy featured in fan magazines like *Photoplay*, Ronald Gregg's work has critiqued public fascination about the queer, sexual dimensions of MGM's William Haines's star image, a fascination also advanced by Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* and William J. Mann's book *Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star* (1998).⁶⁰⁹ Mann's work, specifically, is critiqued at length by Gregg for its celebration of Haines's open sexuality as merely an example of the personal freedoms for gay and queer stars of the period. Gregg counters:

This argument, however, rests upon a misunderstanding of the power of the studios to manage star discourse in the early sound period. Given a studio's huge investment in its

⁶⁰⁹ Ronald Gregg, "Gay Culture, Studio Publicity, and the Management of Star Discourse: The Homosexualization of William Haines in Pre-Code Hollywood," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2003): 81-97.

stars, their grooming of Haines from bit roles to stardom, hard work to establish a successful star persona for him that induced audiences to see his films, and use of morality clauses to protect this persona and their investment, it seems unlikely they would have allowed him to act independently in designing and exploiting his own publicity strategy.⁶¹⁰

In such a way, Haines's stardom, as reflected in Gregg's work, proves not necessarily an exception to the norms governing stardom in Classical Hollywood but rather an example of distinct models within these norms, where Haines's case should offer an example of an underacknowledged process in early film studies: "the industry's experimentation with homosexuality to solicit fans and establish "brand" loyalty through the queerness of some stars on and/or off screen in the late 1920s and early 30s."⁶¹¹ Acknowledging this aspect of fan magazine production and systems of industrial promotion is to understand historical encounters in media production repressed by the official film text itself, pointing to ways in which scholars should interrogate textual hierarchies in media production to complicate critical absences of social groups in a given historical period.

What exactly is repressed by the Hollywood Production code in terms of homosexual representation? Situated within the "pansy craze" of the early 1930s, depictions of queer and homosexual identities became more commonplace across vaudeville, burlesque, nightclub acts, literature, and commercial magazines. It was during this time that Gene Malin achieved a certain popularity as a female impersonator working in Greenwich Village clubs, a position that led to his appearance in two Hollywood films during the pre-Code era before his death in 1933. These films included an appearance as a kind of Mae West impersonator in *Arizona to Broadway* (1933), a part in the early Katherine Hepburn vehicle *Dancing Lady* (1933), and an originally planned

⁶¹⁰ Gregg, "Gay Culture, Studio Publicity," 81-82.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

performance for *Double Harness* (1933) in which publicity stills were shot before Malin was removed from the part due to studio fears over his queer flamboyance.⁶¹² Set within this period, William Haines, as Gregg argues, illustrates a case study for the strategies employed by “Hollywood publicists to play on the public’s growing fascination with homosexuality while also trying to protect themselves from the wrath of moral reformers,” using a set of codes to render such a sexual identity as implicit rather than explicit.⁶¹³ In some interviews and profiles, the publicity department worked to draw out his relationship, drawing on a folksy set of wisdom about homosexuality as a kind of gender inversion, a point also echoed in the representation of Haines’s aesthetic interests in interior decoration and antique collection. As Gregg argues, this type of ‘camp sensibility’ extended into his on-screen performances where he employed a certain mimicry of gay performers and female impersonators in films like *Excess Baggage* (1928) and *Way Out West* (1930). This sensibility even extended into his fan magazine characterizations, as promotion for his fans stressed his ability to impersonate such actresses as Greta Garbo. In recovering this history, Gregg’s work recalls similar questions of queer representability explored by Patricia White in *Uninvited* by emphasizing the usage of fan magazine paratexts to signal the homosexual subject through a series of cultural codes to an imagined cosmopolitan audience. In doing so, our understanding of fan materials as a rich and sociohistorical site of the representation of gayness complicates traditional framings found in popular gay historiography as represented in works like

⁶¹² As George Chauncey writes of Jean Malin, “Malin, in other words, was regarded as a gay man whose nightclub act revolved around his being gay, not as a “normal” man scornfully mimicking gay mannerisms or engaging in homosexual buffoonery, as was the case in most vaudeville and burlesque routines. And although he had been imported to midtown by impresarios keen to exploit the nightclub public’s fascination with sexual perversity, Malin did not abide by the conventions of pansy impersonation. That he was not isolated on a stage was significant in itself, for the conventional spatial arrangement would have served to reinforce the cultural distance between him, as a performer, and a clearly demarcated audience. More significantly, his act included ridiculing the men in the audience who heckled him. Or, as one newspaper put it, his act was simply to “infuriate [the] red-blooded he-men who visited his club with their sweeties.” See: George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 316-317.

⁶¹³ Gregg, “Gay Culture,” 88.

The Celluloid Closet, vital as the work has been to the study of gay representation since its publication in 1981. Moreover, this circumstance also points to the obvious need, when handling historical questions, to reject easily made heuristics as “the closet.” Thinking of gay representation through simplistic binaries as in/out of the closet or invisible/visible is to fundamentally misunderstand conditions of censorship that yield such terms of visibility in the first place. Discursive repression, if anything, is the struggle *over* expression, not the elimination of signifiers of sexual difference. In recognizing this vital lesson, one can track early models of gay subjectivity in fan magazines as examples of these processes of translation through which homosexual subjects have been historically represented in U.S. media industries.

In discussing Classical Hollywood’s publicity departments, it is important to draw out the somewhat obvious point about its relationship to typologies of characterization found within psychoanalytic literature about the topic of homosexuality through themes of gender inversion, a dynamic that was used to explain public fascination between gay audiences and the diva performer. This latter point helps contextualize the discourse of Judy Garland’s celebrity as a representative icon of gay sexual identity throughout the 1960s. Garland’s fan materials rehearse this confinement of gay fandom to the paratextual level. Garland’s gay stardom, moreover, is significant for how it continued mythologies of gay identity as rooted in certain framings of gender inversion that were first observable in the star-image constructed around William Haines, a strategy that was also employed, in Leonard Leff’s analysis, for Clifton Webb in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶¹⁴ Moreover the themes of Garland’s relationship to her gay fans as built around self-acceptance and female outsider-ness are ones that would later echo in the development of the diva’s gay address in such

⁶¹⁴ See: Leonard Leff, “Becoming Clifton Webb: A Queer Star in Mid-Century Hollywood,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Spring 2008): 3-28.

music acts as Madonna, Bette Midler, and Lady Gaga, pointing to the ways in which the sexual conditions of the 1930s, as they played out in Classical Hollywood, inform, at some level, the development of the public relations strategies used at the century's end. While Garland's gay fans were a spectacle by a suspicious mainstream press, later depictions of gay fans that populate the diva's visual culture through concert monologues, talk-show appearances, and other spaces would take on a language of gay self-acceptance and self-expression through gendered figures as the diva. This dynamic, moreover, illustrates the ways in which public rhetoric around homosexuality continues to echo psychoanalytic motifs formed in this earlier period of Classical Hollywood.

For instance, consider the collision between the critical text and performing subject from a review of Judy Garland's performance at the legendary Palace Theatre in 1967: "Curiously, a disproportionate part of her nightly claue seems to be homosexual. The boys in the tight trousers roll their eyes, tear at their hair and practically levitate from their seats, particularly when Judy sings: *If happy little bluebirds fly, Beyond the rainbow, Why, oh why can't I?*"⁶¹⁵ Written by *Time*, the review itself worked to paint the portrait of an unsteady and unpredictable show, claiming that Garland's "concerts have the will-she-finish suspense of a marathon run, the will-she-crack-up tension of a road race."⁶¹⁶ In a certain sense, the oddity of Garland's gay public seemed to confirm certain aspects of her own gender deviancy:

Her audiences arrive, it seems, achingly aware of Judy's tortured past: her teenage stardom and traumas, her voice crack-ups and innumerable busted contracts, her four broken marriages to increasingly younger men (she just broke off an engagement to a public

⁶¹⁵"Séance at the Palace," *Time*, August 18, 1967, 40.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*

relations man 16 years her junior), and her ailments and suicide attempts. As a result, she evokes a purgative pity and terror.⁶¹⁷

Othering yet sympathetic, the article would also include a photograph of Garland's performance that displayed an audience of mostly white men with the caption: "Judy & Cultists in Manhattan: Less a performance than a love-in."⁶¹⁸ Such editorial decisions reflect not only the longstanding ways in which the concept of fandom has itself been culturally pathologized but also the ways in which cultural othering of gayness puts into association gender and sexual deviancy, reflecting both the ways in which homophobia is rooted in certain ideologies of misogyny as well as the lack of critical awareness about the distinctions between gender and sexuality.

Such a moment in the long history of Judy Garland's mythologized career seems hardly appropriate for capturing the range of investments that queer audiences had in her as a cultural symbol. Richard Dyer has positioned Judy Garland's cult status as particular to white male gay subculture in metropolitan cities like New York, London, San Francisco, Amsterdam, and Sydney that developed after 1950.⁶¹⁹ In his schema, Dyer argues that there are three essential qualities that help explain Garland's particular affinity to the white gay community: ordinariness, androgyny, and camp. In terms of her ordinariness, Dyer describes the public image that Garland came to have as the all-American, girl-next-door image that MGM promoted prior to the 1950s. Garland's persona, Dyer observes, embodied the image of heterosexual normalcy. In promotional photographs for her films, Garland was typically presented girlishly or positioned in everyday situations. The public stories about the difficulty of her private life that subsumed her public image

⁶¹⁷ "Séance at the Palace," *Time*, 40.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 138.

throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as Dyer argues, revealed, in fact, that Garland was quite different than the vision of ordinariness constructed by the studio system and its intermediaries. Reasons for the abnormality of Garland were myriad, but among them are how her public stumbles reflected the unique and gendered pressures of female stardom, particularly around the press's treatment of her sexual relationships with men and her physical appearance. It is Garland's challenge of fitting into the public's image of her pre-1950 persona that Dyer argues reflected a homologous relationship between the performer's experience of public life and gay identity. "To turn out not-ordinary," Dyer writes, "after being saturated with the values of ordinariness structures Garland's career and the standard gay biographies alike."⁶²⁰ Yet, crucially, Dyer's reading of this connection seems to play out the same ideologies of diva worship reflected in Garland's *Time* review, reflecting, at a certain level, the ways in which readings of Garland's stardom depended upon mid-century psychoanalytic assumptions about homosexuality as gender inversion. These assumptions crucially place deviant gender and sexual identities as homologous to one another, an key analogy that the modern diva makes use of in her address to gay audiences.

While these cultural fictions have turned towards the diva figure as a representation of homosexuality within the public sphere, readings of diva worship by its most influential critics have echoed these assumptions about the capacity of the diva's performance to render self-intimacy with one's sexuality and sexual identity. In *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, Wayne Koestenbaum mixes cultural history and autobiography in his examination of the diva and her relationship to homosexual identity. His meditations on the diva – to little surprise – return to the familiar metaphors about the consumption of female stars as conduits to one's queer identity formation. His work erotically metaphorizes this affective

⁶²⁰ Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," 153.

investment through the female performer's vocal ability to penetrate the fan's inner self. Koestenbaum writes: "a singer doesn't expose her own throat, she exposes the listener's interior. Her voice enters me, makes me a "me," an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered."⁶²¹ The author's work recovers the erotic potential of selfhood through the diva as one that is built on the communion with the diva as an act of self-penetration.

To this point, Koestenbaum's seminal study of the diva returns to the familiar locus of Judy Garland as the site of this personal self-intimacy, noting that while Garland is not an opera singer that her fans have much in common with those of opera queens. Searching his copy of *Judy: The Films and Career of Judy Garland*, the author describes the celebrity meet-and-greet photographs of Wayne Martin, a self-described superfan. Martin, strangely enough, became an early model of professionalized fandom as he set up regular correspondence with MGM's publicity department before getting involved with writing film reviews and taking candid photos for magazines. Martin had become famous in the Garland fandom for his wall-to-wall collection of Garland ephemera referred to as "Judyland." Interestingly, his fame as a fan of Judy's celebrity would earn him media opportunities as in the case of a radio interview with Louella Parsons and the opportunity to handle requests for information about Garland. As the two developed a relationship, biographers have discussed the fierce protectionism of Judy Garland towards Martin, frequently telling him to make sure that he got paid for his work.⁶²²

In his book, Koestenbaum pauses on the description of Martin by the *Los Angeles Times*: "Leaving the peculiar jumble of Judyland, one first feels pity for the thoughtful, gentle man inside.

⁶²¹ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 43.

⁶²² Art Seidenbaum, "Garland's Life Recorded by Fan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1963, B7. Quoted in Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*.

On second thought, Martin has more company than many other lonely people in this world.”⁶²³ This characterization represents the distinct ways in which representations of fandom are routinely pathologized in public discourse. Koestenbaum’s reading of the Wayne Martin image and its attending characterization by the *Los Angeles Times* depict the ways in which homosexual disclosures themselves have been a process of reading connotative signs such as diva worship. In pausing on this subtext of Martin’s loneliness, Koestenbaum draws out familiar narratives of gay identity: “I’d know that even though he loves to curate Judy’s career, the world deems him asexual and frustrated—as if Judy were having a real life and Wayne Martin were doomed to confuse reality and representations.”⁶²⁴ It is this allusion to loneliness that works to accentuate the role of subtext in rendering gay identity and desire as legible within publicity framings of Hollywood production and representation practices.

Attempts to make sense of this connection have historically positioned the struggle of deviant female stardom in terms of the gay experience. Indeed, the *Time* review of Garland’s Palace Theatre engagements, too, worked to mythologize the relationship of homosexuality to diva celebrity. Garland’s press clipping included two psychiatric opinions that sought to explain the phenomenon of gay diva fandom, thus illustrating what Chon Noriega saw as the sympathetic but medicalized treatment of homosexuality in the press of the period.⁶²⁵ Dr. Leah Schaefer claimed that homosexuals gravitate toward superstars because “these are the people they can idolize and idealize without getting too close to. In Judy’s case, the attraction might be made considerably stronger by the fact that she has survived so many problems; homosexuals identify with that kind of hysteria.”⁶²⁶ In agreement, Dr. Lawrence Hatterer’s opinion added: “Judy was beaten up by life,

⁶²³ Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, Sections 33-34.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁵ Noriega, “Homosexuality and Film Reviews,” 22.

⁶²⁶ “Séance at the Palace,” *Time*, August 18, 1967, 40.

embattled, and ultimately had to become more masculine. She has the power that homosexuals would like to have, and they attempt to attain it by idolizing her.”⁶²⁷ Such language is intriguing precisely as it represents the officially sanctioned medicalized discourse around homosexuality that existed prior to the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses six years later. Moreover, these opinions do much to center an understanding of gay diva worship through a thematic core about the personal endurance and self-sufficiency of the female star in her ability to claim agency for herself through performance.

As articulated by Lisa Kudrow’s *The Comeback* (2005; 2014), these themes about female stardom are now best emblemized by the publicity narrative of “the comeback” in which images of female promotional labor are spectacularized into a media event in order to drive audience demand for the return of a usually female performer. A comeback story is a persistent theme in Garland’s public life, as she worked to navigate the fallouts of her marriages, drug addiction, and physical ability to maintain a touring career. The comeback narrative, itself, can be observed here as intimately connected to diva celebrity as a narrative about gay fandom that invests in the image of the diva as an icon of self-endurance within the context of gendered and sexual marginalization. That this cultural association can be observed as a recurring feature in popular psychiatric accounts of gay fandom in the 1960s sits tensely with the ways in which the image of the gay fan is still routinely summoned by contemporary fan material of female artists, pointing to the underexamined histories that structure our own consumption of media. To this point, I argue that this language of survival long associated with the memory of Judy Garland’s stardom as queer can

⁶²⁷ Ibid. Judith Peraino has discovered the existence of an editorial from *The Los Angeles Advocate* following this review in which the author parodied pop-psychology theories that drew out such bunk readings of gay men and their devotion to Garland as diva. See: Dick Michaels, “The World is My Ashtray,” *The Los Angeles Advocate*, September 1967, 2. Quoted in Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Los Angeles, CA and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 126.

be observed as a recurring metaphor and homology within the paratextual branding practices of more contemporary diva celebrity.

The Diva and Subcultural Appeal:

As Rosemary Hennessy has observed, cultural visibility, as an idea, is a contested term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, as it can be figured simply as a matter of display, the effect of cultural discourses, or complex social conditions. Hennessy's work contends with the interpretive difficulties of LGBTQ subjects being embraced within the context of the cultural industries in the 1990s from music and moving-image texts like Madonna's "Vogue" (1990), Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1991), RuPaul's "Supermodel" (1992) to Stephan Elliot's *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and Mike Nichols's *The Birdcage* (1996). Acknowledging that cultural visibility can offer renewed imaginations around the need for civil rights protections is to also give credit to the work of activists like those involved in GLAAD and ACT-UP, among others, in their fights to provide dignity and health to queer communities. Written within the context of the mid-1990s, Hennessy critically enriches studies of visibility as a discursive trope in discussions of LGBTQ media and politics, as she interrogates popular representations of homosexuality and processes of cultural commodification. Her work, crucially, contends that the framing of cultural visibility: "has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences," particularly as images of gay subjects in cultural texts have intensified through the branding of media as socially or politically progressive.⁶²⁸ Recognizing Hennessy's work is to understand the latent class (and, indeed, racial) tensions in commercial depictions of homosexuality, particularly as a quasi-political, quasi-

⁶²⁸ Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, No. 29 (1994-95): 32.

subcultural edge has filtered into the images of the diva's fandom through the discursive uses of a largely, though not exclusively, white gay fandom.

New marketing regimes of cultural visibility situated around politicized media productions need to be interrogated for the media histories from which they draw. One under-acknowledged issue in the study of social movements are the ways in which the struggle of marginalized communities have focused on systems of media production as part of a broader organizing around civil rights protections in and around the cultural marketplace, as Matt Connelly recovers in his study of LGBTQ protests of queer representation in films like *The Laughing Policeman* (1973) and *Cruising* (1980) through the context of gay liberation activism.⁶²⁹ These debates of media representation flow from earlier histories and arrange American ideologies of citizenship practice through economic participation in cultural industries. Writing in *A Consumers' Republic*, Lizbeth Cohen examines the politics of mass consumption in the U.S. by contextualizing it historically as a distinct citizenship practice. Originating in part through progressive activism of the early 20th-century, Cohen locates an intensifying linkage between consumption and citizenship particularly in the World War II era where housewives managed the home front through domestic and civic duties, as African-American communities regularly contended with the unequal conditions of citizenship in a consumer environment that regularly denied them full access to housing, restaurants, and public transportation.⁶³⁰ Frequently referred to as a period of American prosperity, this delineating moment in the 1940s of the consumers' republic forwarded a vision of a government-supported marketplace that promised economic prosperity as the cornerstone of a more democratic nation. This period, as we know, featured the renewed growth of suburban

⁶²⁹ Matt Connolly, "Liberating the Screen: Gay and Lesbian Protests of LGBT Cinematic Representation, 1969-1974," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2018): 66-88.

⁶³⁰ Lizbeth Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 13.

residential enclaves, backed by federal policy, that provided mass-produced housing developments as the primary vehicle for the generation of wealth for the U.S. taxpayer, a system that has been critiqued as the economic engine of racial wealth inequality during the post-war moment. Often overlooked within this context are the ways in which cultural consumption was imbued with similar orientations of economic participation as a civic good.

To this point, Cohen situates this period in terms of its development of discourses around cultural consumption, as she investigates the ways in which marketing and advertising strategies moved from mass marketing as the persuasion tactic of mass consumption to market segmentation and the development of “psychographic” marketing categories, a term describing market research that studies populations through psychological variables.⁶³¹ Cohen’s work examines the ways in which this strategy of market segmentation centered aspects of cultural identity that would later be echoed in how political campaigning approached the organizing process. While the early 20th-century emphasized marketing strategies that displaced certain notions of cultural difference, Cohen argues that from the period of the 1950s onwards, “this shift in marketing from mass to segment ... recognized and reinforced subcultural identities, giving often disempowered Americans, such as workers, feminists, teenagers, African Americans, and Latinos a kind of legitimacy through proving their worth in the consumer marketplace.”⁶³² Provocatively, this point, for Cohen, illustrates the ways in which the postwar moment’s consumer activism gave

Capitalists and rebels alike a shared interest in using consumer markets to strengthen – not break down – the boundaries between social groups. ... The marketplace became more like other fractured places in post-World War II America, most notably residential communities

⁶³¹ Cohen, *Consumer’s Republic*, 14.

⁶³² *Ibid*, 331.

and commercial centers, where an investment in mass consumption ironically also propelled Americans away from the common ground of the mass toward the divided, and often unequal, territories of fragments, accentuating in the process everything that made these places different from each other.⁶³³

As Marilyn Halter writes about the cultural marketplace's focus on social identity, "the demassification of American cultural identity ... has been reflected, even paralleled, in the ways that the business world has reshaped its own marketing tactics... whether applied to people or products."⁶³⁴ Recognizing this linkage between civic consumption and marketing, as it was forged in the postwar moment, is crucial for understanding the ways in which a gay media market segmentation emerged within the 1970s and its articulation of a certain vision of cultural consumption as part of broader citizenship practices. The significance of this pursuit of belonging lies in the placement of national identification outside of the state and into the marketplace, a dynamic that is particularly key for understanding the later political context of neoliberalism and its cultural forms. This circumstance yields critical insights in studying the mythologies that this period featured about a gay audience and its relationship to the diva.

This scrambling of cultural and political registers, moreover, as part of a broader organization of audience formations through notions of state governance and national debate, is a dynamic that undergirds the development of a gay market and industrialized versions of a gay brand culture. In her study of the emergence of brand cultures, Sarah Banet-Weiser observes:

Niche marketing, in connection with the emergence of identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, helped to create a new understanding of "authenticity" as a desirable *market*

⁶³³ Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 331.

⁶³⁴ Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2000), 6.

category. The dominant category of the white middle-class consumer of the 1950s – the mass audience – rendered a focus on “authentic” identity somewhat irrelevant, as the mass audience did not encourage comparison with others as a way to demonstrate one’s “true” self. The “real” person, rather than a composite generalized consumer, became a dominant representation in advertising in the later part of the 20th century, tapping into a nostalgic longing for authenticity that apparently was missing in the era of mass consumption.⁶³⁵

This analysis reflects the ways in which many marginalized groups worked to assert their own agency in the marketplace against the exclusionary framings of mass produced media in which the recognition of cultural difference could be seen as divisive or political, as was the case when Jean Malin, before the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934, was edited and recast from *Double Harness* (1933) over concerns about Malin’s flamboyant presence.⁶³⁶ Within this new moment, the ways in which this niche marketing worked was to hail individual consumers as members of specific media communities, thus attaching a sense of cultural belonging to the forms of cultural consumption and identification involved in media spectatorship. This dynamic, further, points to the pivotal role that reception studies can play in working to understand the textual histories of publics as one way to examine the organization of marginalized social groups into the cultural marketplace. In an era of activism based around economic freedoms that asserted the right to be represented in the marketplace, this language of visibility, Banet-Weiser argues, is one way in which identity politics and niche audience formations came to share an epistemological base.⁶³⁷ With this perspective, an understanding of the struggles over articulating the notion of gay identity

⁶³⁵ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 29.

⁶³⁶ About the incident, R.K.O studio president B.B. Kahane has often been alleged to have said: “I don’t think we ought to have this man on the lost on any picture—shorts or features.” Quoted in Brett L. Abrams, *Hollywood Bohemians: Transgressive Sexuality and the Selling of the Movieland Dream* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2008), 41.

⁶³⁷ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 32.

and its distinct political features in the postwar moment provides necessary contextualization for the emergence of the diva's gay fan.

In fact, within the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, there was intense deliberation about the circuits of media production and distribution to gay and queer audiences.⁶³⁸ Notably, Michael Bronski has written about the Stonewall era and the development of an openly gay press as distinct within this period's emergence of queer publics. The first publication, starting in October of 1952, was *ONE*, a publication started by more progressive members of the recently formed Mattachine Foundation, followed nearly a year later by the *Mattachine Review* as a magazine.⁶³⁹ First published in 1955, the lesbian publication *The Ladder* began circulating by the Daughters of Bilitis, as part of broader attempts in this period for promoting "a better understanding of homosexuals to the general public."⁶⁴⁰ Indeed, these claims of education and providing better images or understandings of queerness to the public would represent a significant dynamic in understanding the queer ideologies of media representation that contemporary depictions of diva worship synthesize.

Reflecting strengthened "obscenity" protections in the courts, the continued production of these publications was due to their survival through legal challenges, as Katherine Sender notes the U.S. Supreme Court Ruling in *ONE vs. Oleson* (1958) found gay publications were not necessarily viewed as obscene materials.⁶⁴¹ Produced by sponsoring political organizations, *ONE* and *Mattachine Review* have often served for critics as representative of a certain impulse of 1950s

⁶³⁸ According to Rodger Streitmatter, one possible example of the first gay and lesbian publication was in Los Angeles produced by a Los Angeles secretary known by the anagram of lesbian, "Lisa Ben," who distributed the magazine *Vice Versa* starting in 1947 as a way of fostering community outside the urban bar scene. See: Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1995), 52.

⁶³⁹ Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 79-81.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

⁶⁴¹ Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 26.

homophile activism for its commitment to respectability politics. Bronski writes: “at a time when the swish stereotype was all the popular imagination contained, they emphasized the opposite image of the responsible, mature, and straight-looking homosexual. *ONE* and *Mattachine Review* attempted to end gay oppression through “fitting in” respectably.”⁶⁴² Important for this reading of *ONE* and *Mattachine* archives are the ways that these publications imagine political and social change as intimately structured by the conditions of cultural representation, a historical orientation crucial for understanding how media producers and texts remain, in key ways, situated within this citizenship discourse of national culture. Yet, as has been the focus in this dissertation, these discourses reflect critical ideologies of cultural uplift by producers and critics who posit direct connections between the visibility of gay identity in media and the social treatment of the LGBTQ community as a whole. In doing so, the ensuing influence of these publications and their focus on representational politics has been to invest in the media marketplace as a site of inclusion.

In the following decade, new publications emerged that marked a new sense of sexual liberalism for the queer community in its growth as an advertising outlet for the emergence of a gay market. Started in Los Angeles in 1967, *The Los Angeles Advocate* began as a publication that brought urban white gay subculture to a more organized readership. It is in this magazine that advertisements and forms of gay capitalism could begin their national development outside of the quasi-legal system of nightlife that had operated in urban locales in the pre-Stonewall era. For example, the development of Pat Rocco’s softcore pornographic work, which exhibited publicly at the Park Theatre in Los Angeles during the late 1960s, was forwarded by a series of advertisements in *The Los Angeles Advocate*. These ads followed Rocco’s use of the *LA Free Press*, an underground newspaper of the 1960s, to distribute his filmic and photographic work.

⁶⁴² Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 146.

The development of this magazine reflected, for Bronski, that “gay culture had reached a point by 1967 where it could be marketed at a profit. It had become a saleable commodity –in all of its various forms.”⁶⁴³ Katherine Sender, as well, situates *The Los Angeles Advocate* as the first “openly gay newspaper to actively court national advertisers.”⁶⁴⁴ While the beginning of the magazine’s publishing tended to treat its readership in both political and cultural terms, its sale from Dick Michaels to David Goodstein in 1974 reflected new economic opportunities for the publication.

Dropping “Los Angeles” from its name, the newly titled *The Advocate* implemented a series of changes to make its appeal to marketers more desirable and more national in its interest. Among them included distancing the publication from editorials featuring the more radical politics of the Gay Liberation movement and the confinement of sexual content in the magazine to an easily discarded insert. At the same time, these images of gay subjectivity came, in Katherine Sender’s understanding, to be associated with “most positive stereotypes of gay men – that they were stylish, trendsetting, and affluent—to displace the less palatable caricatures, including that of the ““immature” homosexual.”⁶⁴⁵ Discussion of a national formation of the gay press necessarily invites clear questions of commercial privilege – i.e. particularly over which subjects in the LGBTQ community were capable of accessing capital to develop this commercial niche. At the same time, the development and subsequent commercialization of a local gay press in such outlets like *The Advocate* work to illustrate the growth and development of the (white) gay market during the 1970s and its ideological vision of cultural representation. Within this development, new forms of gay address became historically situated within outgrowths of political movements

⁶⁴³ Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 147.

⁶⁴⁴ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 26.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 30-31.

that posited direct correspondences between cultural representation and social change. This circumstance matters precisely as national boundaries with urban formations of culture were challenged within the later part of the 20th-century thanks to the rigorous expansion of constitutional protections of media in other First Amendment cases like *Joseph Burstyn, Inc v. Wilson* (1952) and *Manual Enterprises, Inc. v. Day* (1962).

Amidst the emergence of a national gay press, corresponding cultural developments illustrate the ways in which the growth of this initial gay market served to influence other formations and constructions of taste for the previously dominant mass media audience. Embodying the intersections of identity-based marketing and its appeal to non-minoritarian subjects, one prominent example in the history of divas in terms of building a gay public is the example of Bette Midler. Her career draws upon the historical boundary crossings that marked urban nightlife from the 1920s and 1930s as a performance attraction at the Continental Baths in the 1970s. Opened by Steve Ostrow in 1968, the Continental Baths were a fixture in New York gay nightlife before their closing in 1975. A certain public imagination about the bathhouse has tended to think of its setting as confined merely to its sexual function for the gay community. Here, one must remember that sexual identities are constituted by far more than sexual acts alone – indeed, they are also built out of cultural narratives. In his study of the history of the gay bathhouse, Allan Bérubé has positioned the bathhouse as the culmination of a historical gay struggle “to overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality, to gain their right to sexual privacy, to win their right to associate with each other in public.”⁶⁴⁶ Moreover, as it is represented in Joseph Lovett’s documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s* (2005) distributed by Wolfe Video, the gay bathhouse has been mythologized within queer narratives of sexuality as a venue

⁶⁴⁶ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, eds Dangerous Bedfellows (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), 188.

of cross-class and cross-racial same-sex intimacy in the mythologically hedonistic tradition of ancient Rome. These utopian dimensions around the social mixing of the bathhouse have been tempered by Leo Bersani, in particular, who has worked to push back against this myth, writing on the bathhouse as “one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable.”⁶⁴⁷

One reason of the persistence of this type of mythology around the bathhouse reflects the ways in which the forms of public sex and its hedonistic edge are recounted in post-1970s gay and queer culture. Queer, critical engagements with 1970s sex culture, in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, illustrate what Jose Esteban Munoz’s has termed “queer utopian memory” in which forms of remembrance re-enact a culture of sexual possibility by helping to carve out a “space of actual, living sexual citizenship.”⁶⁴⁸ Usually unremarked upon in academic literature on bathhouses is how these spaces also served to constitute other forms of citizenship practices not based merely on sexuality as a form of physical pleasure. As Bérubé adds in his study, the 1970s saw the development of cultural programming and entertainment at the bathhouse. While this included, of course, the development of exhibiting pornography, it also entailed movie nights in which Hollywood films like *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and George Cukor’s *The Women* (1939) were

⁶⁴⁷ Perhaps offering a critique of networked gay dating apps decades before their popularization, Bersani continues sharply: “Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection, generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world.” See: Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October*, Vol. 43 (Winter 1987): 206.

⁶⁴⁸ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 35. Here, Muñoz is drawing on Douglas Crimp’s notion of the “culture of sexual possibility” in his discussion of the queer utopian memory at work in John Giorno’s short autobiographical fiction and Tony Just’s visual art. For Crimp, this culture of sexual possibility worked to describe the mix of nostalgia and mourning in remembering the pre-HIV landscape of gay sex. His remembrance emphasizes not just the loss of men and women due to the pandemic of HIV/AIDs, but he writes to include the loss of cherished forms of sexuality by the community. In his list, he includes the disappointing prohibition of Crisco as a lubricant due to its corrosive effects on latex and the deflated appeal of public sex locales as back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and truck stops, among other places. See: Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October*, Vol. 51 (Winter 1989): 11.

screened for their gay cult status.⁶⁴⁹ Moreover, various bathhouses also worked to book live entertainment throughout the 1970s, which included talent from icons Martha Raye, Lesley Gore, and the Andrews Sisters. An interesting dynamic of the Continental Baths' cabaret shows was a tendency of booking Black disco talent like Gladys Knight, Gloria Gaynor, and The Pointer Sisters. Through these performances, disco divas were put into material contexts of gay consumption practices, echoes of the ways in which diva performers also anchored the sounds of gay nightclub space during this period. These venues remain underexamined sites in our understanding of the ways in which performers and media figures modified their niche appeal as compared to the national address of the mass media audience.

One of the most storied performers at the Continental Baths was Bette Midler, who was accompanied at various points in her career by Barry Manilow on piano.⁶⁵⁰ Midler's career, moreover, stands as an example of the new visibility for the LGBTQ community during this period and the new public tastes for gay-themed entertainment that came with it. Capitalizing on the availability of gay countercultural cache within this period, Midler was able to rise from performing in the Continental Baths in the early part of the decade to earning an Emmy Nomination for her NBC special, *'Ol Red Hair is Back* (1977), by shrewdly synthesizing traditions of camp via Mae West and Judy Garland and minstrel-tinged vocal traditions from vaudeville via Sophie Tucker in her one-woman show at the Baths. While this engagement would eventually be credited with launching her career, this circumstance was not at all guaranteed when she started, as an explicit address to a gay audience was not necessarily a good recipe for success considering the

⁶⁴⁹ Bérubé, "The History of Gay Bathhouses," 202. Further, the popularity of this venue in the public imagination of the period, perhaps, can be illustrated by Richard Lester's film production of *The Ritz* (1976).

⁶⁵⁰ Barry Manilow described Bette Midler's performances: "I wasn't really the focus of attention during those shows. It was all about Bette. She was fucking brilliant. I mean it. You never saw anything like it. It topped anything Lady Gaga is doing today. And she did it without any stage tricks or fancy effects. It was just Bette and me and a drummer." See: Eric Spitznagel, "Barry Manilow Only Ever Played One Bathhouse with Bette Midler," *Vanity Fair*, June 2, 2011, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2011/06/barry-manilow-qa>.

negative attention that even Garland's gay fans attracted in the press just years earlier. Yet, it is clear, retrospectively, how Midler was able to fit within an understanding of the baths as a symbol of recent gains of cultural and economic gay visibility in ways that felt distinctly political but were inseparable from the networks of urban gay capitalism that crept into the mainstream during this period.

Midler's interview in *The Advocate*, by Vito Russo no less, paints the image of a special relationship between the performer and the gay community by dramatizing the stakes of her fame's explosion as its own form of 'outness' in the cultural mainstream. In her early performances at the baths, Vito Russo emphasizes that audience members had their pick of any one of the folding chairs, while the establishment's other patrons continued splashing in the pool against Midler's complaints of "that goddamn waterfall."⁶⁵¹ While starting to attract a local gay audience, the performer would earn several appearances on syndicated shows like *The David Frost Show* and *The Mike Douglas Show*. These television appearances partially advanced the public intrigue over the singer. The owner of the Continental Baths, Steve Ostrow, came to attract an outsider audience for Midler's act, gesturing back to the urban tradition of "slumming" in the 1920s and 1930s that Chad Heap documents in his work.⁶⁵² A fascination with this new audience for the singer included anecdotes that rock star Mick Jagger, critic Rex Reed, and the pop-art Warhol crowd also came to watch Midler perform. Vito Russo recounts that tense incidents were common between the cultural tourists and members of the gay community: "A straight woman called a man a drag queen and he threw her in the pool. Fights broke out between straight men and gay men who tossed off their towels and danced nude in front of shocked wives."⁶⁵³ As a straight audience entered the baths

⁶⁵¹ Vito Russo, "Bette Midler: An Exclusive Interview," *The Advocate*, April 23, 1975, 31.

⁶⁵² Heap, *Slumming*.

⁶⁵³ Russo, "Bette Midler: An Exclusive Interview," 32.

with curious expectations about its cultural offerings, U.S. Representative Bella Abzug (D-NY19;20), known for starting the National Women's Political Caucus with Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and Betty Friedan, would also enter the venue to campaign for public office, pointing to a similar system of political outreach by market segmentation that Lizabeth Cohen has observed as a key feature of the postwar moment.⁶⁵⁴

By June 1973, Midler seemed to illustrate the receptivity of the times in her own public 'coming out' from the underground of the Baths and limited touring schedule into the more 'respectable' venue of Carnegie Hall. The same year, Midler also appeared at the 1973 Gay Pride Day in Washington Square Park with around 17,000 individuals in attendance.⁶⁵⁵ With the release of *Divine Miss M* (1972) selling past a million records, Midler continued her march into the center of popular culture with her own engagement at The Palace Theatre, where she mixed past and new stage material to address both her gay fans and new straight following. At the end of the decade, Midler's Hollywood breakout film, *The Rose* (1979), in its loose-narrativization of Janis Joplin's life featured the performance of disco artist Sylvester as a drag queen singing along to Bob Seger's "Fire Down Below." In demonstrating the mainstreaming of gay subculture through her figure of diva-ness, Midler demonstrates the ways in which the political firmament of the 1970s, a period in which the LGBTQ community came to be thought of as a more coherently political *and* consumer entity, offered new opportunities for the cultural tastes of urban entertainment and did so through the unique subcultural appeal of the diva performer.

In terms of the music marketplace, musicians have long employed strategies for marketing themselves as distinct in terms of the brand they offer their audience. The modern music industry

⁶⁵⁴ Peter Ogren, "Bella at the Baths," *The Advocate*, July 5, 1972, 1.

⁶⁵⁵ Vito Russo, "Waiting for the World To Catch Up: New York's Vito Russo Takes a Retrospective Look at The Divine Bette Midler," *Gay News*, June 19, 1975, 23.

particularly emphasizes the building of artist personae as a central site of brand development. To this point, Nancy K. Baym, writing in *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*, describes the work of musicians in garnering intimacy with their fans, reflecting the ways in which such intimacy is achieved through a range of mediated relationships. Her work crucially focuses on the non-music dimensions of audience development for an artist, particularly as they labor over their brand as having cultural value in the commodities that they offer, whether it be a new album, a concert, or a film project. Describing this work, she develops a reading of the term “relational labor” as the “ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work.”⁶⁵⁶ She argues that this labor includes 1) acts of communication, 2) time and effort used to develop relationship skills and knowledge, 3) the ongoing work of understanding yourself, others, and the audience relationships that are being built, 4) the development of concrete communicative and relational strategies, 5) the boundary making and marking it takes to set the boundaries of these relationships, and 6) the management of these relationships and the shifting dynamics within them.⁶⁵⁷ In defining this term, Baym emphasizes its value for understanding the transformations of intimacy that have transpired across the 20th-century. Reading this history, issues of music consumption were once disciplined in the branding of the phonograph through the intimate respite of the home. This strategy of branding expanded in the postwar moment, as it had in the development of “race records” in the 1920s, through a discursive turn towards categories of identity in public life as a new location of intimate longings. This discourse, in critical ways, reflects the centering of various civil rights rhetorics developed by various marginalized social groups of the period.

⁶⁵⁶ Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*, 19.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 19-20.

Midler herself offers an intriguing example of this form of relational labor in how she established a rapport and loyal fanbase in the Continental Baths that served as a point of authenticity in her relationship to the gay community as she moved out from the queer underground. In archival footage of her performances, Midler demonstrates the value of using interstitial monologues between musical numbers to perform this type of labor with her audience, doing so by communicating a familiarity with urban gay humor of the period particularly through elements of camp and celebrity worship. One joke found humor in Martha Raye wearing a button that stated “Joan Crawford is a heterosexual.” Another told a story of Zsa Zsa Gabor on a trip to Ohio where in her hotel room she discovers two men having sex before Midler reveals the punchline that the hairdresser stays as Ms. Gabor runs away.⁶⁵⁸ In the footage, the setting of the Baths clearly offers Midler a certain kind of license to refer to gay sex as its own kind of comedy yet doing so with the distinct purposes of expressing an intimacy with the gay community through her bawdy humor. In the archival footage, she went as far to joke that she was booked to sing at Cherry Grove on Fire Island but “they couldn’t find room for me in the bushes,” a wink to the acts of public sex found in the wooded areas of Fire Island colloquially known as the “meat rack.”⁶⁵⁹ Midler, in an interview, would later explain: “If I kept my distance from them, they’d lose interest...So I had to become part of them, be *with* them.”⁶⁶⁰

Through these moments, Midler’s monologue conveys her affiliation to the community through this demonstration of in-group knowledge. In such a way, the performer demonstrates her authenticity by situating herself as a part – not separate – from the community. Vito Russo speaks to this same dimension in his profile:

⁶⁵⁸ Archival materials accessed through: “Bette Midler – Continental Baths Concert,” YouTube Video, 54:50, Posted by “MrReto2812,” April 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOrzpQeJyKI>.

⁶⁵⁹ “Bette Midler – Continental Baths Concert.”

⁶⁶⁰ David Shaw, “Bette Midler: Gutsy, Unique, and Divinely Talented,” *Cosmopolitan*, August 1978, 90.

“People have wondered why she was able to get by with the things she said and did; why she was able to play the sarcastic ‘queen’ and not be offensive. It was, simply, because she had become ‘one of us’ and for a time, onstage at the baths, had entered the gay world and the gay head. It was coming from one of our own people and it didn’t hurt.”⁶⁶¹

The attribution of in-group identity to Midler’s performance within the Continental Baths is significant for its illustration of the demands of authenticity placed on diva performers who target gay media niches. As Midler’s career moved further into the mainstream, Russo notes the sense of resentment in the gay community, particularly at the baths, at having Midler’s sarcastic gay jokes heard by outsiders:

Later, when the same humor was used, at times, to shock and titillate the straight audiences which flocked to see her, it *did* hurt, because they weren’t supposed to be in on it and we resented it. They were laughing at us as fag jokes, not with us as a family. It couldn’t last very long.”⁶⁶²

Russo’s comment dramatizes the difficulties of maintaining authentic subcultural appeal in the media mainstream, tensions that have surfaced in the careers of other divas as Cher, Madonna, and Lady Gaga, among others. This concern itself was even asked by an audience member during Midler’s *Donahue* interview in promotion for *The Rose* (1979), widely referred to as her Hollywood breakout role. Midler, perhaps defensive, responded that she hadn’t lost her gay audience, but that her fanbase had broadened to include young couples and older folks.⁶⁶³ True or not, Midler’s words illustrate the ways in which the subcultural appeal of the diva in post-1960s

⁶⁶¹ Russo, “Waiting for the World to Catch Up,” *Gay News*, 23.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶⁶³ Archival materials accessed through: “Bette Midler - Phil Donahue Interview about 'The Rose' (Part 2),” YouTube Video, 15:17, Posted by Bette Midler Fans, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XdA2DxIsUk&t=321s>.

culture was framed within broader appeals to more traditional audience formations due, in part, to public fascination with the heterosexual diva's queer performance.

Other examples of this relational labor included the specific *venues* of Midler's interviews that illustrate the value of a niche market mentality when embracing the larger brand potential of an artist's work. To this point, Midler's branding as a gay diva worked to attach subcultural appeal to her mainstream persona. In the 1975 Vito Russo interview for *The Advocate*, an editor's note is attached to heighten the intimate weight of Midler's words appearing in the magazine:

The interview portion of this article is one of a scant half-dozen granted to the press before Bette Midler's return to Broadway on Apr. 14. In spite of an over-protective publicity team, Ms. Midler went out of her way to assure that *the ADVOCATE* was included along with *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, and *New York Magazine*. The majority of the photographs used here were chosen at the time of the interview by Bette from her personal collection of favorite shots. They are published here for the first time at her request.⁶⁶⁴

The editor's note, partially derived from Midler's "over-protective publicity team," works to attach a special privilege in the relationship of Midler to the magazine and its gay readership. Such framings presented here treat exclusivity as a kind of marker of intimacy and therefore authentic connection with her audience. At the same time, such disclaimers also attempt to raise gay niche outlets like *The Advocate* to the level of more mainstream publications as central to her public address.

These examples of 1970s gay branding offer historical context for the ways in which diva worship as reflective of homosexual subjectivity has flourished in the post-Stonewall era. One primary reason for this flourishing is due to the repetition of key motifs that would be echoed by

⁶⁶⁴ Russo, "An Exclusive Interview," 31.

later stars in pursuit of this subcultural appeal. During a November 1974 conversation with Andy Warhol for *Interview*, Bette Midler positioned her stint at the gay baths as an ordinary part of her personal history:

And I didn't even think twice. I mean, have been in those circles ever since I was fourteen years old. That's why I'm so amazed when I meet people in show business who say, "How could you do that? What made you do that? Sing in a place like that with men in towels?" To me it was just another place, it wasn't anything to write home about.⁶⁶⁵

Moreover, her interview with Russo features now-canonical language of the diva's relationship to her gay audience being built primarily on discourses and themes of self-expression:

Oh, hell, Vito, listen. It's all right for anybody to be who they are. Just as long as they don't let their dogs shit on the street. Just so they don't make your life miserable. I don't think there's enough time to fritter your life away thinking bad things or venomous thoughts about other people and how they live.⁶⁶⁶

Here, Midler's comments seem to symbolize a certain frankness and crassness used in vernacular framings of gay acceptance within a more libertarian cultural approach. As well, such moments of publicity also presage the types of comments about "being who you are" that would gain popularity throughout the 2010s as U.S. public opinion substantively changed on the issue of gay marriage.⁶⁶⁷

Stepping aside from clearer questions of cultural rhetoric, Midler's comments in *The Advocate*

⁶⁶⁵ Andy Warhol, "Andy and a Very Smart Cookie," *Interview*, November 1974, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/bette-midler-andy-warhol>.

⁶⁶⁶ Russo, "An Exclusive Interview," 34.

⁶⁶⁷ Disappointingly, Bette Midler's career has also been filled with moments in which she has seemed to distance herself from the community that brought her to fame. Appearing on *Larry King Live* in 2003, Midler suggested that her poverty as an artist played a substantive role in her decision to perform at the Baths, while expressing that she had little idea of what a gay bathhouse was at the time. In the same interview, Midler answered a question about her support for gay marriage in almost equivocal terms, attempting to avoid the religious aspects of marriage but emphasizing that she supported access to the civil protections and benefits of marriage for gay marriage. The transcript of Midler's November 26, 2003 appearance on *Larry King Live*, released by CNN, can be found here: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0311/26/lkl.00.html>.

illustrate the changing nature of public relations around sexual difference within the context of the early 1970s. In this period, the product differentiation of media and television intensified the parceling of various identities into media communities, of which the diva's gay address developed as a significant component of this landscape.

Scholars documenting the emergence of the gay market have traditionally identified the period of the 1980s as initially a period of promise. Katherine Sender documents the series of advertising deals achieved in this moment, including Boodles Gin for running the first ads in a gay publication. This development was quickly mirrored by other alcohol companies as Tuaca, Smirnoff, and Absolute Vodka took out ads in gay publications to court the commercial spending of gay men in nightclubs and other restaurants. The realities of a gay market, here, can be seen to develop around the specificity of gay bar networks in urban centers. Despite this success, fears remained particularly high over the issue of brands being perceived as "gay products," which might have caused its own commercial difficulties with groups like the Moral Majority and their boycotts during the emergence of the New Right. Within this environment, the subcultural appeal to the gay audience continued in both explicit and implicit terms. An example of this phenomenon within the context of diva, perhaps, is the example of the performer Cher during the turn of the 1980s. One intriguing issue in studying this performer's career is the ways in which her embrace of a gay fanbase has increased throughout her career since her roots in *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour* (1971-74) and *The Sonny and Cher Show* (1976-77).

Cher's more explicit address to LGBTQ communities arrived more forcefully within the context of the 1990s amid her son's process of coming out and later transitioning. About this coming out, Cher spoke of her growing acceptance of this queerness through venues like *The*

Advocate. Reflecting on the sense of her failures as a mother to accept her child's queer expression, Cher stated:

Well, you know, intellectually, I don't know. Emotionally, I just didn't want it to be the truth. I was talking to my friend the other night about this. I was telling him my reaction, and I was saying that I thought I would have had a much different reaction based on my so-called philosophy. But when it comes to your own children... I think that whatever my reaction was, it was a disappointment to me. But that's what it was. No, your being gay was not something I was hoping was a fact of life.⁶⁶⁸

This moment worked to dramatize larger orientations of the struggle for parental acceptance within a cultural context in which the figure of parents to gay children (what was once colloquially known as the PFLAG mom) had an explicitly valuable role in larger coalitional politics, as activist organizations like Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays expanded significantly during the 1990s. Situated within Cher's interventions in public constructions of gay acceptance through her motherhood is the potential obscuration of her career's longer cultivation of an implicit queer address through her career affiliations.

In the debut of her standalone series, *Cher* (1975-76), Bette Midler was among the first guest stars on the series, as the two sang the "Trashy Ladies Medley," in which the two performers dressed in burlesque costumes that embraced sexual readings of their bodies.⁶⁶⁹ Contrasting this performance, Cher, Bette Midler, and Elton John played in a satirical skit about a retirement home for aged performers. In the sketch, Cher and Bette Midler do a send-up of their exotic fashion by

⁶⁶⁸Chastity Bono, "Cher: The Advocate Interview," *The Advocate*, August 20, 1996, 58.

⁶⁶⁹Archival materials accessed through: "Cher & Bette Midler - Trashy Ladies Medley (Live on The Cher Show, 1975)," YouTube Video, 7:28, Posted by Cher Fan Club, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGQ-hu_Ceow.

performing older versions of themselves in eccentric costumes and white-haired wigs, eventually leading to a performance of all three together as their younger selves.⁶⁷⁰ In fact, this moment on television is one that Midler would cite later as a career highlight in terms of her gay fans in *The Showgirl Must Go On* (2011), a recording of her Vegas residency at Caesars Palace.⁶⁷¹ Here, the influence of nascent demographic niches as connected to issues of television programming offered ways in which intertextual components of celebrity were available for appropriation within non-queer identified programming, offering the shadows of a queer public within the limitations of a medium shifting in its mass mediated address from the 1970s to the 1990s. Moreover, the *Cher* sketches also illustrate the changing address of music stardom within the context of television in the 1970s, particularly as older versions of showgirl fashion *a la* Bob Mackie's costume design extended its explicit subcultural references through casting Midler and John within the sketch.

Cher's show would also feature her ability to produce and chase subcultural cache of the era, as new disco and rock performers appeared on her show like The Pointer Sisters, Tina Turner, and David Bowie. The urban and countercultural undertones of such performers illustrate, in a certain way, the diva's cultural commitments as cultivated within older histories of performance and public address that were re-synthesized by disco as a music genre initially industrialized out of the foregrounding of non-majoritarian identities. Cher, like many other singers of the period, had chased the disco market, a move that she has intimated did not leave her particularly excited. During the production of "Take Me Home" (1979) for Casablanca Records, Cher worked with Bob Esty who had arranged such songs as Donna Summer's "Last Dance" (1978) and would later help produce The Weather Girls' hit "It's Raining Men" (1982). In a certain sense, the turn towards

⁶⁷⁰ Archival materials accessed through: "BETTE MIDLER, CHER, ELTON JOHN - In the year 2025 (complete)," YouTube Video, 8:21, Posted by BerlinDirk2, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maEHGUeUSUA&t=202s>.

⁶⁷¹ *The Showgirl Must Go On*, DVD, Directed by Bette Midler (Los Angeles, CA: Image Entertainment, 2011).

disco, for Cher, represented a certain reality of the marketplace and its genre expectations for female performers. By the end of the 1970s, the subcultural orientations of the genre rooted in its celebration of urban African-American and gay communities had shifted, in part, by the popularity of such film texts as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) with John Travolta. Alice Echols, in her study of disco's impact on American culture, has observed how the film, on its surface, operates "in a heterosexual register," reflecting the number of examples of homophobia throughout the film such as derogatory references to David Bowie's bisexuality.⁶⁷² Moreover, it is through this creative period that signs of Cher's focus on the subcultural energy of her stardom explicitly manifested.

While *Take Me Home* joins Bette Midler's own *Thighs and Whispers* (1978) as an example of the white-passing diva's negotiation of the disco phenomenon, the album's staging for Cher's first solo world tour and residency at Caesars Palace in Vegas drew out this gay subtext of disco by emphasizing the diva culture that had marked it. During the concert tour, Cher and her producers, including Joe Layton who had worked on Bette Midler's "Clams on a Half Shell Revue" (1975), hired several drag queens to impersonate Diana Ross, Cher, and Bette Midler. Starting in June 1979, the tour eventually was broadcast on HBO in 1981 and then on Showtime in 1983, illustrating the ways that diva concerts have long been economically valuable in terms of their ability to attract audiences for television and cable platforms like HBO.⁶⁷³ Moreover, this tour, in putting emphasis on drag depictions of Ross, Cher, and Midler, worked to dramatize the subcultural appeal of the diva for her audience. As interesting as the decision to hire drag queens is the choice of songs that were lip-synced. In the Diana Ross drag number, an impersonated Ross lip-syncs to "I'm Coming Out" (1980), a song that had achieved its own lore in disco history

⁶⁷² See: Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2011).

⁶⁷³ Archival materials accessed through: "Cher - A Celebration at Caesars (Full 1981 Concert Special)" YouTube Video, 48:17, Posted by Cher Fan Club, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krerAw_scrk.

following Nile Rodgers's arrival at the idea after watching drag performances of Diana Ross. The dance number at Cher's Vegas residency, in part, recovers this subtext translated into the title track of the song. While Rodgers has claimed that Ross did not initially know this queer subtext, there is no doubt in Cher's inclusion of it in her show that the producers were drawing upon this reading.

These queer associations are foregrounded by the decision to have drag impersonators highly marked within the show's production, as a winking nod to queer figurations of diva worship. Moreover, this inclusion of Ross's subcultural appeal appears authorized when considering that the Ross impersonator is introduced to the stage through a recording done by Ross herself, suggesting the ways in which Ross gave personal license for these dimensions of her star image in the audience appeals made by Cher's show. Moreover, Midler, too, authorized the use of this subcultural reading of her stardom on behalf of Cher, joking "Listen if there's anything you taught us women in the world of show business, it's never work in the same dress for longer than eight minutes."⁶⁷⁴ Against this recording, a drag performer impersonates the movements and gestures of Midler to her recording of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" (1941). Following these performances, the three queens join each other in a rendition of Midler's "Friends" (1973) to illustrate their performative allusion to queer solidarity. In these ways, Cher's navigation of the subcultural dimensions of stardom in this new marketplace illustrates the ways in which she drew on the subcultural capital of other performers as a way of forming aspects of her own queer audience address. This centering of subculture would intensify in the following decades as a market for the gay audience and an explicitly gay brand expanded for divas like Cher.

⁶⁷⁴ "Cher - A Celebration at Caesars (Full 1981 Concert Special)" YouTube Video.

The decade of the 1990s brought with it, in many ways, the niche market promised by the original organization of gay consumption and advertising patterns first started two decades prior. Katherine Sender has rightly contextualized the various technologies of this new market niche as rooted in not only the rapid expansion of print media but also revolutions in direct mail, commercial sponsorships, and the internet. It is in this period that the almost apolitical calls for gay acceptance would be articulated by sponsorship brands as Absolut Vodka whose marketing spokespeople stated: “We’re not encouraging or discouraging [homosexuality], we are just making a statement. It’s very important in [the] nation and civilization we are living in to be accepting of people.”⁶⁷⁵ In a certain sense, this development should not be viewed as particularly surprising, as the emergence of the gay market reflects, perhaps, one of the liberalizing effects of capitalism through its approach to market segmentation, while tempering this observation by recognizing its emphasis on white masculinities in its mainstreaming of gay representation. As Alexandra Chasin argues about the industrialization of forms of gay and lesbian culture into the marketplace:

Market mechanisms became perhaps the most accessible and the most effective means of individual identity formation and of entrance into identity-group affiliation for many gay people. When consolidated this way, group identity can form the basis of a political movement for rights equal to those of other citizens; capitalism ... enables a political struggle for rights. More specifically, group-based activity in the marketplace is dependent on, and essential to, political organizing for legal rights and protections based in identity. That’s what identity politics is. The same economic forces, however, or maybe capitalists in particular, tend to favor the displacement of that struggle back onto the market...the

⁶⁷⁵ Gary Levin, “Mainstream’s Domino Effect,” *Advertising Age*, January 18, 1993, 32. Quoted in Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 40.

corollary effect is that consumption becomes a form of political participation, perhaps supplanting other, more direct, models of participation.⁶⁷⁶

Chasin's argument here reconsiders critical formulations of the term identity politics to call more specific attention to the cultural and political realities of organizing through the marketplace and its effects on ideologies of consumption. These effects underscore broader shifts within consumption and citizen practices of the period and point towards its intensification in the following decades since the 1990s.

Television programming in the 1990s illustrates the effects of this new regime of niche marketing appeal on older mass media formulae. While broadcast networks continued to enjoy a certain ease in winning their timeslots, the 1990s recession forced a key confrontation between mass media strategies and market segmentation in terms of cultural programming. As Fox established itself as a legitimate fourth network by delivering programming to targeted consumer groups, ABC, CBS, and NBC were forced to respond to the lessons of the cable revolution. In this environment, new representations of cultural identities on broadcast networks aimed to increase audience interest through the seeming development of new cultural brands. As Ron Becker has observed, the networks turned to an upscale market in this period reflecting consumer research of the 1980s that had found that upper-middle-class consumer demographics without families would have a desirable amount of disposable income. Reflecting this research, "the networks imagined this 1990s era upscale market to be comprised not simply of generic upscale adults," Becker argues, "Instead they envisioned this audience to be "hip," "sophisticated," urban-minded, white, and college-educated 18-to-49 year olds (perhaps even 18-to-34) with liberal attitudes, disposable

⁶⁷⁶ Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000), 24.

income, and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility.”⁶⁷⁷ Becker names this demographic as “slumpies” to refer to their market position as “socially liberal, urban-minded professionals,” an update on the yuppies of the 1980s with a distinct twist on the new social politics of the decade communicated through television branding. It is this imagined audience formation that led to the explosion of gay-themed programming as a prime-time phenomenon between 1995 and 1998, though this consumer development seemed imperiled by the difficulties of Ellen DeGeneres’s coming out episode of *Ellen* in 1998.

As Becker notes, this type of programming was situated within the contestation over audiences with disposable income during this period and sought to raise the bar on their programming so as to dispel ideas about broadcast television as too safe when compared to the consumer revolutions posed by MTV and HBO, among other cable channels.⁶⁷⁸ This precarity of gay content, previously relegated to a number of themed-episodes on a wide array of shows such as *The Golden Girls* (1985-92), eventually led to the development of *Will & Grace*, a sitcom that remixes the formula of such network classics as *I Love Lucy* by playing on the figure of the straight man in its depiction of lawyer Will Truman and his best-friend, the red-headed Grace Adler, along with their friends, campy Jack McFarland and a Mae West-style billionaire’s wife named Karen Walker. While the NBC classic is an obvious example in the history of gay-themed content, its place in that canon is no less significant. In fact, it was this series that then Vice President Joe Biden acknowledged in his ‘groundbreaking’ political support for gay marriage in a 2012 *Meet the Press* interview even before President Barack Obama had publicly disclosed the same political

⁶⁷⁷ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 95.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-107.

position. On the subject, Biden pointed to the role of the marketplace as reflecting cultural shifts in the push for political change:

My measure ... is that I take a look when things really begin to change is when the social culture changes. ... I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public more than almost anything anybody's ever done so far, and I think that people fear that which is different. Now they're beginning to understand.⁶⁷⁹

Perhaps adjacent and related to this point, Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow have studied how despite the heralding of positive representations of gay men, *Will & Grace* re-situates “the potentially controversial issue of homosexuality within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre.”⁶⁸⁰ Moreover, this safe situation includes the privileging of heterosexuality, “while homosociality (relationships between same-sexed individuals) constantly fails or is safe-guarded within the parameters of “male bonding” rather than same-sex desire.”⁶⁸¹ These issues speak to the ways in which the sitcom series evinces the contradictions of its period, particularly over the ways in which the subcultural edge of an emergent gay market became married to the relatively safer orientations of mass media programming. At the same time, the series illustrates the ways in which the relationship of the gay fan and the diva itself exists as part of the textual archive of branded homosexuality in its ‘coming out’ into mainstream cultural programming.

The authenticity of the diva as a subcultural gay figure is made more apparent by examining the list of guest stars over the show’s run. Starting in the third season, the series began booking

⁶⁷⁹ Seth Abramovitch, “Joe Biden Cites ‘Will & Grace’ in Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 6, 2012, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/joe-biden-cites-will-grace-320724-0>.

⁶⁸⁰ Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 2002): 87.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid*, 92.

pop stars and divas as part of the storylines of the gay men featured on the programming, Jack and Will. In Season Three, Episode Seven, entitled “Gypsies, Tramps and Weed,” Will receives a gift certificate from Grace to see a psychic about his love life. The ensuing narrative plays out certain kinds of sexual fears seemingly more extant within the period of the 1990s. The psychic, at first assuming Will is straight, suggests that he will end up with his best friend, Grace, a moment in the long chain of references of the “will-they-or-won’t-they” storyline that commonly appears in broadcast television yet dramatizes, perhaps, older attitudes of gayness as just a phase. Once Will tells the psychic that he is, in fact, gay, she advises him that he will likely end up with his other friend, Jack. Will is horrified at this prospect, presumably over his friend’s coded flamboyance, within the context of the episode, phrased through feminine aspects of Jack’s diva worship. Throughout the episode, Jack is seen playing with the figure of a Barbie-doll version of the performer Cher, an apparent reference to Bob Mackie’s series of dolls for Mattel that featured his trademark costumes. In one moment of excess, Jack seems to accentuate Will’s anxieties about marrying such a caricature of gayness when his statement of “I do” leads to a fearful fantasy of Jack in drag repeating nuptial vows. The episode’s logic around the incompatibility of Will and Jack as romantic partners is rooted in these same metaphors of homosexuality as a kind of gender inversion, marking Jack’s performance of drag within a longer lineage of gay representation in the pre-Stonewall-era. Moreover, the episode receives its most spectacular moment at the end of the episode, where Jack, after yelling at his Cher doll, meets the actual singer who he mistakes for a drag queen. Humorously, Jack retorts to the performer, “I do a better Cher than you.” After which, he continues to do a series of lines using a mocking impersonation of Cher’s vocal timbre that now broadly typifies drag imitations of her persona on shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-Present).

Tired of Jack's shenanigans, Cher slaps the superfan while quoting one of her famous lines from *Moonstruck* (1987), "Snap out of it!"⁶⁸²

More than a fun cameo, Cher's guest appearance in the third season represented new cooperative strategies between broadcast networks and marketing firms. In fact, the doll that Jack carries around for most of the episode is, in fact, a new product that had been prepared for release following the episode's premiere. In a piece of advertising criticism, Stuart Elliot documents how the show's producers were lent a \$60,000 prototype of the doll for shooting the episode, while audiences could sign up for release updates about the doll by e-mail on the Mattel website. Elliot describes the prototype's appearance on the show as "emblematic of the rapidly blurring line between programming and peddling in American entertainment media as the distinction between paid and unpaid content becomes increasingly unclear."⁶⁸³ The report also featured a statement from Mark Malinowski, senior vice president and director at Ketchum Entertainment marketing: "we were talking to our client Mattel, which was launching this doll with a finite budget... and in a brainstorming meeting we mentioned 'Will & Grace,' because the character of Jack loves Cher." Continuing, Malinowski adds, "It's strategic for the product and relevant for the audience... Let's face it ... They're the ones who are going to buy the doll."⁶⁸⁴ Malinowski's comments here illustrate the creeping logic of the diva as an embodiment of cultural marketing through the perceived identity of her gay audience.

⁶⁸² *Will & Grace*, "Gypsies, Tramps and Weed," Season 3, Episode 7, Directed by James Burrows, Written by Katie Palmer, NBC, November 16, 2000.

⁶⁸³ Stuart Elliot, "The Media Business Advertising: A Mattel doll modeled after a certain singer does a turn on 'Will & Grace.' Is it product placement?" *The New York Times*, November 16, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/16/business/media-business-advertising-mattel-doll-modeled-after-certain-singer-does-turn.html>.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Moreover, the singer's supposed cut of the sale, disclosed in the article, had been promised to charitable organizations fighting facial and cranial disorders among children and fundraising for the World War II Memorial in Washington. This example of product placement illustrates clear ways in which entertainment marketing, media merchandising, and the branded public of the diva all come together in the influence of her cultural appearances in TV series like *Will & Grace*, while also showing the ways in which homosexuality expressed as gender deviance has continued histories into the contemporary media environment. As we discussed, this gender deviance, rooted in psychoanalytic assumptions of homosexual inversion, was one of the ways in which homosexuality was represented within the public discourse of Hollywood's mass media address. Such formulations continued into the period of ramifications posed by the development of the gay market and audience in such areas as television through the ways in which entertainment personalities came to target new market opportunities for their work.

The repetition of this formula is a particularly attractive development for the way that the pop star as diva came to be centered within turn of the century mainstream representations of gay characters. In the two-part Season Four episode entitled "A.I.: Artificial Insemination," Cher revisits the world of the show again and is featured in the role of a goddess. Jack McFarland, in the episode, decides to abandon his long-held ambition for show business to join the ranks of Barney's department store, declaring his new-found identity as a "retail queen." The steady work is phrased within the episode as a financial allure for Jack, as he gains his own office for the first time in his working life. Pressured to quit his pursuit of show-business, Jack struggles with the decision until he bumps his head and hallucinates being sent to heaven. While there, he has a discussion with Cher as a representation of his god. When arriving in heaven, confused, Jack states aloud: "Homo I don't think we're in Barney's anymore," a play on Judy Garland's famous line in

The Wizard of Oz (1939) and the ways that this mythos of diva worship continues to enter the textual archives of commercial gay representation. When Jack directly asks Cher if she's a deity, she replies, "it depends which bathhouse you pray at." After Jack erroneously jokes that Cher had not won the Oscar for *Moonstruck* – to which she tells Jack he best not forget that she had – Cher pushes him aside to perform her upcoming single "A Different Kind of Love Song," a musical number that makes heavy use of special effects. Seeming to recall the controversies over Cher's initial appearance on the show as part of a brand partnership with Mattel, Jack interrupts her performance, "you're hawking your album during my dream!" To which Cher counters, "well, somebody's got to pay for the fog and dancing fairies," thus humorizing the promotional value and potential of Cher's appearance on the show to market her then-album *Living Proof* (2001) within the gay-branded audience of *Will & Grace*.⁶⁸⁵ This episodic narrative visualizes the ways in which promotional culture makes use of authentic symbols in its navigation of audience formations, within which the modern diva has become particularly valuable for targeting a perceived gay audience and those interested in consuming such queerness through media production.

Over the following seasons, this formula, though less rooted in product placement or other marketing efforts, would be repeated to great comedic effect. In a Season 5, Episode 21 entitled "Dolls and Dolls," Madonna guest starred after the release of *American Life* (2003) as the character Liz who attempts to be roommates with Karen Walker. Making jokes about authenticity rhetoric in publicity discourses, the performer sends up her superstar stature, referring to herself as "super real" as she displays her ability to open a soda-can. She confesses to Karen Walker that she works

⁶⁸⁵ *Will & Grace*, "A.I.: Artificial Insemination," Season 4, Episodes 26 & 27, Directed by James Burrows, Written by Adam Bar, Jeff Greenstein, & Alex Herschlag, NBC, May 16, 2002.

in the music industry as an office manager for a company that compiles Greatest Hits of the 1980s collections. She describes her resistance to including this detail in her classified ad due to the fears of finding music wannabees seeking to live with her. Karen, oblivious to these intertextual references to Madonna's stardom, seems to joke about the devotion of a gay fanbase, "Well, I can see why you want to keep that a secret, Liz. You must never know if people are really liking you just for you or the '80s hits." Bonding over their new residential relationship, Liz and Karen decide to go out on the town in pursuit of casual sex. Strife strikes their relationship as they soon find out their mutual attraction to a man named, Kurt. Fighting over the man through sexually provocative humor, Karen seems to land the episode's joke about Madonna's humbled position in the narrative: "You're an oddly confident 40-year-old secretary."⁶⁸⁶ While this moment seems to parallel the type of lay criticism often advanced by certain strains of misogyny in diva fandom, the moment also illustrates the ways in which performers use their guest appearances to heighten their articulation of performance personae, here figured through a perceived authentic address to the gay community.

Within this context, such navigations of a niche audience, observable in millennial television, is no longer simply about marketing to narrower audience constructions but rather the ways in which cultural affiliation offers opportunities for defining television consumption within larger social practices of citizenship in the cultural marketplace. This dynamic, precisely, became an industry model for performers particularly interested in mythologizing their celebrity as a cross-platform experience. This playing upon the diva's public image would characterize Jennifer Lopez's three-episode arc from the Season 6 finale to the Season 7 premiere, in which she plays a

⁶⁸⁶ *Will & Grace*, "Dolls and Dolls," Season 5, Episodes 21, Directed by James Burrows, Written by Kari Lizer, NBC, April 24, 2003.

version of herself that emphasizes the intense demands of transmedia stardom. When asked to perform at Karen's wedding, Lopez agrees to the engagement despite needing to remix her album and finish her novel within her already busy schedule of studying for her real estate license. In the follow-up episode in which Lopez performs, she ends up hiring Jack as her background dancer after another one gets injured. This moment in the narrative seems to recall stereotypes that all gay men have an intimate knowledge of the dance choreographies of their favorite divas, thus drawing on the familiarity of certain gay tropes within broader texts about diva worship. Lopez's appearance on the show connects the visibility of these tropes to the consumption of her brand, as her various product deals are emphasized within her guest appearance. One example features Lopez promoting her fragrance "Glow" by pestering at her other background dancers to wear the scent, asking "Do you think that I just put that in your Christmas stocking for nothing?"⁶⁸⁷ In these images, the tropes of diva-ness and self-promotion are implicitly sent up in sitcom fashion, while also illustrating the ways in which such performers and their various brand engagements came to be inflected in the world of the show as guest stars.⁶⁸⁸ Recognizing this context, moreover, on television and its negotiation of an identified gay market re-casts traditional histories of cultural representation by centering the industrial contexts through which such narratives and images of queerness flourished. Yet importantly, these negotiations also became re-situated into the political address by such stars within gay media venues, as the diva's performance of queer authenticity

⁶⁸⁷ *Will & Grace*, "I Do. Oh, No, You Di-in't," Season 6, Episodes 23, Directed by James Burrows, Written by Jeff Greenstein, Jhoni Marchinko, Kari Lizer, and Sonja Warfield, NBC, April 29, 2004.

⁶⁸⁸ Other pop stars who were represented in the show include Janet Jackson ("Back Up, Dancer"(2004) – Season 7, Episode 2) and Britney Spears ("Buy, Buy Baby" (2006) – Season 8, Episode 18). Broadway/musical divas guest stars included Patti LuPone ("Bully Woolley" (2005) -- Season 7, Episode 15), Bernadette Peters ("Whatever Happened to Baby Gin?" (2006) – Season 8, Episode 22), and Debbie Reynolds (12 episodes (1999-2006), thus illustrating how the gay sensibility of the show extended into the specific logic of guest star casting decisions. Thus, *Will & Grace* shows how the narrative structures of the sitcom were negotiated in the construction of a mainstream gay address on network television specifically through the figure of the diva as pivotal to the articulation of gay-themed programming.

became available to organize LGBTQ publics into larger political and media coalitions in our contemporary era.

Importantly, this era of growing gay male representation in the cultural marketplace reflected the success of specific forms of consumer-oriented citizenship practices, marking out a mode of belonging for gay subjects by their representability, in Patricia White's language, to mainstream audiences. As I have endeavored to show, this dynamic often entailed a two-way street in which the cultural imagination of homosexuality also operated as a form of brand extension for such stars as Cher, precisely due to perceptions of her authentic relationship to the gay community. While *Will & Grace* took place within a moment in which the mass media address of broadcast television had been challenged by the forms of market segmentation on cable television, there were also parallel developments of this use of diva celebrity that were taking place in NBC's cable programming as well. In particular, Katherine Sender has explored the ways in which NBC's development of the network Bravo in the early part of the 2000s represented gay-themed programming was used in the service of gaining a white, heterosexual female audience, a dynamic no doubt also at work in the large ratings for *Will & Grace* within traditional broadcast television.⁶⁸⁹⁶⁹⁰ The commercial experimentation represented by Bravo, Sender argues, is the development of the format of "dualcasting," a reference to the ways in which the network's gay programming was marketed to both women and gay men during the early part of the 2000s. Within this context, it is important to understand the textual constructions that dominated such programming, which was to include televisual expressions of gay figures for female audiences by

⁶⁸⁹ Katherine Sender, "Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences," 302-318.

⁶⁹⁰ To note, cable television has been able to have a safer relationship to niche programming particularly because its funding models both sell commercial air-time via advertising much like broadcast networks while subscription fees provide another bulwark against some of the commercial pressures of the marketplace.

drawing on the perceived authenticity of cultural tropes via associations of cosmopolitan charm, flamboyance, and diva worship.

Drawing on the availability of gay images from shows like MTV's *The Real World*, Bravo programming introduced such shows as *Queer Eye* within the context of a changing corporate ecosystem of media production. NBC, in fact, had acquired Bravo with the aims of using the platform as an alternative programming outlet for NBC content. While fears over the cancellation of *Queer Eye* marked the transition of ownership, NBC appeared excited at the prospect of the show, a reality series wherein gay men make over straight men, an apparently edgy piece in appealing to a younger demographic that centered heterosexual boundary-crossings in its textual address. The success of the show caused many to wonder about the future of the network, and if it would continue to be a home for gay content. While the answer, in some senses, was yes, Bravo President Jeff Gaspin officially disciplined this industrial reading of their programming by emphasizing that their specialty was not in selling a gay audience to advertisers and had aimed to find success with women aged 18 to 49.⁶⁹¹ Part of this bringing out the subcultural address and theming of such programming was to use a re-run of Cher's retirement concert as a lead-in to the premier episode of *Queer Eye*. The images of gayness on the network in such programming often worked to draw on the range of associations found within the fertile marketing period of the 1980s in which outlets like *The Advocate* took on the affluent stereotypes of the white gay male as trendsetters. Sender writes, "By linking the channel's content with characteristics consolidated by gay marketing – that gay men are trend-setting, affluent, female-friendly, and newsworthy—Bravo

⁶⁹¹ See: "Bravo Tries to Snag Female Viewers with Gay Programming," *The Advocate*, July 29, 2003, <https://www.advocate.com/news/2003/07/29/bravo-tries-snag-female-viewers-gay-programming-9422>. Gaspin's words are also included in Sender, "Dualcasting," 307.

shed some of its staid reputation.”⁶⁹² In doing so, the use of such “gay” programming supplied layers of authenticity and social exoticism for the affluent female audience it sought.

Moreover, Cher as a defining brand within this consumerist representation of gay social identities – however authentic the relationship with the performer has come to be – was further echoed in the addition of Kathy Griffin’s stand-up material on the network and her reality tv-show *My Life on the D-List*, wherein the performer takes on the tropes of the female gay best friend and indulges a notion of homosexual relationships with diva celebrity through media gossip and frequent references to her fans as “my gays.” Within the addition of this type of material on the network, one understands the ways in which the subcultural brand formation of the diva, in figures like Cher, are pivotal associations sought when trying to assert authentic relationships with specific audience formations. More broadly, Bravo, dualcasted to quasi-gay and mainly female audiences, has preserved a number of these defining tropes about gay subjectivity that have developed between the 1960s and the mid-2000s. Situated against the backdrop of the fight for marriage equality between 2004 and 2015, Bravo’s gay address suggests how certain desires for social change were reflected in cable programming as particular sites of assimilationist citizenship practice through rubrics of cultural visibility.

The Diva Digitizes Gay Fandom:

As historically depicted in popular culture, the gay fan is regularly represented through the activity of consuming the diva’s brand through DVDs, concert tickets, and merchandise. The fans profiled in the Dolly Parton documentary, *For the Love of Dolly* (2008), illustrate precisely how diva worship has built itself upon the intertwining logic of consumption and self-expression

⁶⁹² Sender, “Dualcasting,” 313-314.

through images of gay fandom. The gay couple, Patric Parkey and Harrell Gabehart, profiled in the documentary discuss how their intimacy formed over their bonding and acquisition of Dolly-related objects. In one part, Harrell describes how his mother does not accept his gay identity and his refusal to live in the closet for her. The centering of Dolly as a kind of familial and maternal metaphor transforms later in the documentary as this same fan would state about his making of doll replicas of the singer: “I’ve always said that this will probably be the closest to making babies.”⁶⁹³ Such framings reveal firsthand accounts of the ways in which diva worship functions often as a representational discourse about queer kinship, yet it is precisely this facilitation of both queerness and kinship that overlooks the ideological function of gay fandom as a mode of representing consumption as a form of cultural belonging.

Video footage of a tour of Patric and Harrell’s house reveals an overloading sea of Dolly paraphernalia from her former costumes to newspaper clippings to action figures. Patric discusses how Dolly came to be a common ground for the couple, as their collection moved beyond their initial room devoted to Dolly. Here, this intimate history of consumption, the couple’s extensive labor of tracking down such paraphernalia, is phrased as one way that the couple relates to each other, precisely as Dolly comes to function in their story as a foundation of their relationship to gay identity. More than this, Harrell expresses his dream to eventually become a producer of fan material at Dollywood, pointing to the ways in which his economic dreams are intertwined with his cultural investment in Dolly’s stardom. Indeed, Harrell demonstrates how gay fandom draws on the diva as a representation of the gay self: “When I truly find my self-respect and truly find myself, she’ll be one of the prime people” who caused it.⁶⁹⁴ Here, images of gay fandom draw on

⁶⁹³ *For the Love of Dolly*, DVD, Directed by Tai Uhlmann (New Almaden, CA: Wolfe Video, 2006).

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the figure of the diva as a metaphor about self-discovery, drawing out the similar thematic framing found in the public fascination around Garland's gay fans as previously discussed in her 1967 review. By framing the diva as a conduit for selfhood, such images of gay fandom work to minimize the ways in which feelings of queer visibility are used variously to organize and commodify listening/audience formations using cultural signifiers like social identity.

These scenes and images of gay fans cannot be isolated from the broader conditions of media interest in fandom as a type of consumer identity built around more active economic relationships. In terms of representing the gay fan, a rhetoric of diva and gay visibility are directly advanced through what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might refer to as “the epistemologies of the closet,” or “the promise of gay self-disclosure,” bound within the longer histories of how sexual orientation became a defining demarcation of personhood from the 19th-century onward.⁶⁹⁵ Here, such epistemologies of the closet are positioned through the privileging of ideologies of self-revelation and visibility found within the location of the diva as premised on her authentic relationship to a gay consumer niche. Historically speaking, broader forms of cultural recognition around social identity started within the postwar moment where political struggle had adopted similar terms around cultural visibility in the marketplace. Reifying cultural identities into market categories, consumer capitalism illustrated the ways that strategies of niche marketing could be made compatible with the language of political activism, a clear feature of our media environment that has impacted the diva as a cultural figure quite significantly. As niche marketing came into fashion at the end of the 20th-century, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, claims of the authenticity of a person or a brand came to be a stressed dimension of the relationships that consumers expected

⁶⁹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 67.

from goods on the marketplace.⁶⁹⁶ Here, challenges to the notion of the white middle-class consumer of the 1950s – frequently imagined as the signifier of the mass audience – stressed differentiation of some kind to break out of the perceptions of confinement of conformity in the mass audience. In Banet-Weiser’s terms, the building of a brand comes to function through the building of an affective relationship with consumers, where the production of specific types of media can be said to auger the management of these relationships with audiences. Examining this idea of the brand as an affective relationship poses key critical insights about the position of the diva in reflecting the role that brands play in the marketplace of cultural commodities.

Following from this history, I ask what marks the affective conditions of the diva to her digital gay public. How has she secured vital perceptions of authenticity in a commercial environment predicated on new logics of engagement, brand management, and fandom? At the end of the 2000s, these questions, it would seem, have been answered by turning to older models of celebrity production and branding (music video production, paparazzi lifestyle photography) that were transported onto the internet. Of the divas most particularly adept at illustrating this history, Lady Gaga, born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, has achieved a global awareness and popular following during the growing influence of social media in late 2000s and early 2010s. Her success, of course, was built around her “Mother Monster” persona during impressive sales of her first three albums: *The Fame* (2008), *The Fame Monster* (2009), and *Born This Way* (2011).

Referred to as “the last pop star” in June 2010 by *The Atlantic*’s James Parker, Lady Gaga’s celebrity was linked to both the spectacle of her social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, as well as the explicit queerness of her media appearances.⁶⁹⁷ Her stardom additionally reflected

⁶⁹⁶ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*.

⁶⁹⁷ James Parker, “The Last Pop Star: Lady Gaga is Simultaneously Embodying and Eviscerating Pop,” *The Atlantic*, June 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/06/the-last-pop-star/308089>.

the rise of YouTube as a leader in music video distribution amid MTV's pursuit of reality-tv media programming. Following "Bad Romance" (2009), the singer's YouTube channel was the first to achieve one billion views in 2010, reflecting the impact of the singer's visual work at the same time that it reflected the new industrial landscape for music video distribution.⁶⁹⁸ As Gaga seemed adept at absorbing attention through internet traffic, her star persona itself came to signify, for some academics, a range of new possible coalitions between popular culture and the political concerns of gender and queer theory. Jack Halberstam, in writing on the Gaga persona, describes her stardom's gender politics as bringing "together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females. It is a scavenger feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time."⁶⁹⁹

Within her star's emergence, Gaga herself exploited these aspects of performed authenticity that were groomed in the era of niche marketing precisely by drawing on the language of political activism. "Alejandro" (2009), which Gaga wrote for *The Fame Monster*, and its promotion through an array secondary media paratexts represented the most concrete way in which the performer channeled her media image of gay rights activism. While premiering a snippet on *Larry King Live*, Gaga described the song to the host as a "celebration of my love and appreciation for the gay community."⁷⁰⁰ Her statement came before a later moment in the broadcast, wherein Larry King asks Gaga how she feels about the array of amateur-produced videos of fans singing her music, a genre of YouTube video that had found great success when Greyson Chance gained

⁶⁹⁸ "Lady Gaga First Artist to Reach 1 Billion YouTube Views," *CBS News*, October 25, 2010, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lady-gaga-first-artist-to-reach-1-billion-youtube-views>.

⁶⁹⁹ Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 30.

⁷⁰⁰ Archival materials accessed through: "Cher - A Celebration at Caesars (Full 1981 Concert Special)," YouTube Video, 48:17, Posted by Cher Fan Club, November 24, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krerAw_scrk.

recording opportunities under Ellen DeGeneres's tutelage in 2010. Asked about Chance's video by Larry King, Gaga's response moved past Chance's short-lived career as an early viral star and paused on the U.S. soldiers who did a video parody of "Telephone" (2010):

Well, yes, of course, but it's actually very interesting that you brought up the soldiers in Afghanistan, because I specifically didn't post that one when I saw it. I wanted to put that on my Twitter, but I got nervous about posting it on my Twitter, because I was not sure how it would be received by the other soldiers, or the other, you know, members of the Army or the administration. So I didn't post it. And then it's quite interesting that all these — these Don't Ask Don't Tell is happening now, that it's happening, because in the Alejandro video, there is sort of this homoerotic military theme in the video. And it kind of makes perfect sense, doesn't it? It — it all kind of comes together culturally and politically. And I — I — it's no secret that I — I don't think that anyone should have to hide who they are, let alone be discriminated against. We can all fight equally.⁷⁰¹

Gaga's interview with King in June 2010 would start the tone of her promotion for "Alejandro." The song was Gaga's main single released during her transition to *Born This Way* (2011), an album that would explicitly articulate her vision of social justice for the LGBTQ community by focusing on issues of community-building for high school youth. At the same time, Gaga vivified the issue of gay rights for Americans by using her public profile. When appearing at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, Gaga appeared alongside four military service members discharged over their sexual identity. Additionally, her choice of fashion for the night included an allusion to Jana

⁷⁰¹ The transcript of Gaga's June 1, 2010 appearance on *Larry King Live*, released by CNN, can be found here: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1006/01/lkl.01.html>.

Sterbak's meat-dress from *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) as a figurative representation of the artist's belief: "If we don't stand up for what we believe in, and if we don't fight for our rights, pretty soon we're going to have as much rights as the meat on our bones."⁷⁰²

Examining this emergence of the Gaga persona, the rubrics of visibility and queer politics around a gay consumer niche could not be clearer. In fact, Gaga's career arc took on valences of this "coming out" process by charting her emergence in the mainstream as itself a process emerging from underground club culture into the mainstream. In various measures, these locales have been coded by Gaga as gay clubs or strip clubs, while the singer has also revealed her own bisexuality. In many ways, this narrative of working her way up from the clubs recalls that of Midler's trajectory from the bathhouse to Johnny Carson, particularly when Gaga's career arc has stressed this sense of loyalty and devotion to the gay community during her early years in media industry. Building on this notion of visibility, Gaga's queer address, whether real or studied, structured the subcultural references made in music videos like "Alejandro" and its provocative production design that borrowed from the homoerotic military undertones of queer art like Tom of Finland, while drawing on a pastiche of other references from divas like Madonna's visual iconography.⁷⁰³

Through LGBTQ activism, Gaga defined herself as a national figure with import in multiple sectors of society. On September 20, 2010, she traveled to Portland, Maine to deliver a speech on gay rights in Deering Oaks Park to exert public pressure on Senators Susan Collins and

⁷⁰² "Lady Gaga Is Not A Piece of Meat: The MTV News Quote of the Day," *MTV News*, September 13, 2010, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2579536/lady-gaga-meat-dress-peta>.

⁷⁰³ Of course, Gaga's debts to Madonna have been well-documented and argued in entertainment journalism. My reference here merely acknowledges certain readings of the music video in its reception without commenting on the veracity of such claims. See: Kyle Anderson, "Lady Gaga's 'Alejandro' Video: A Guide to Its Madonna References," *MTV News*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1641089/lady-gagas-alejandro-video-a-guide-to-its-madonna-references>.

Olympia Snowe's upcoming legislative vote. Her speech worked, in part, as a defense of a specific conception of American national identity premised on ideas about equality under the law. She drew on her previous metaphor of meat to deliver what has since been called her "prime rib of America" speech. In it, Gaga pointed to Don't Ask Don't Tell's prohibition on LGBTQ service members as unjust: "Equality is the prime rib of America, but because I'm gay means that I don't get to enjoy the greatest cut of meat my country has to offer." One significant piece of messaging within the speech was her parodying of military personnel who sought to define homosexuality as a threat to the cohesion of the armed services. While the speech did not interrogate questions of empire or the military industrial complex, Gaga implored:

Before we go to war, shouldn't I be made aware ... that some of us are just not included in that fight? We're going to war for you and you and you and you and you. But not you because you're gay.⁷⁰⁴

Such public and performative acts appeal to certain framings about citizenship and belonging that have long animated critiques of the military. Recalling earlier critiques of the armed forces by gay political activists and Black armed service members, Gaga's advocacy reflected how Don't Ask Don't Tell became a focal point for LGBTQ activism within the context of the late 2000s. Moreover, Gaga's statement also fell into a long tradition of politicking in which the orator paints an image of belonging by re-centering those excluded by dominant constructions of national citizenship.

Gaga's positioning of her celebrity in relationship to gay men and LGBTQ individuals, thus, follows a host of other examples in entertainment history from Kathy Griffin to Katy Perry

⁷⁰⁴A full version of Gaga's September 20, 2010 speech in Portland, ME released by WMTW-TV can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MoqOvFJ5-0c>.

to Madonna to Taylor Swift. To this point, Jimmy Draper has argued that theorizations of gay male spectatorship has largely overlooked the role of paratextuality.⁷⁰⁵ His work studies gay reactions to divas on forums like *Towleroad* and *Queerty* to understand how meaning-making is achieved around these figures, by examining the very legacies of niche marketing that formed around the emergence of gay collective organizing online. Draper provides an interesting argument for reconsidering the archive of how gay men's investment in divas is understood by academics, finding in his study of blog commentators a form of investment in divas compelled by their support for gay men. As he characterizes, many of the digital ephemera produced by these men attempt "to fix the terms by which divas are allowed to circulate in gay cultures..."⁷⁰⁶ In arguing for this change to the archive of materials used to study the diva, Draper reasons that "studies of queer readings risk offering static characterizations of sociohistorical context that seemingly imply all gay men today negotiate the same social and cultural climate, and in turn similarly engage with media, as they did decades ago."⁷⁰⁷ For Draper, re-situating the traditional archive of how gay men relate to diva performers is a move that seeks to ask deeper accounts of spectatorship than have characterized more theoretical accounts of diva worship examined earlier by figures like Wayne Koestenbaum.

Placing attention on diva worship as reception alone, I argue, obscures larger contexts of media industries and their approach to situating various ideologies of cultural consumption as not only a site of representation but self-revelation. As studies of queer theory posit identity as fluid, media industries have sought to condition public discourse about gay fandom of divas as one built around authenticity, imbuing such discourses of gay visibility with notions of representativeness

⁷⁰⁵ Draper, "Gay Men, Diva Worship, and the Paratextualization of Gay-rights Support," 134.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 136.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

in their mixing of commodity branding, cultural consumption, and self-expression. Embodying one type of relational labor, pop stars like Lady Gaga have labored to build a gay fanbase themselves as a type of commodity with distinct aspects of cultural and economic value. However authentically, the underscoring of these gay fans has worked to communicate across larger national divisions in American life, illustrating, in part, how developments in the distribution of popular music have brought with them secondary effects in how gay men are represented as social groups in such paratexts. These images, moreover, connect to broader understandings in popular music culture in how media industries produce slippages between cultural consumption and political participation. Moreover, as I've been arguing, these images of gay fandom produced in such fan ephemera matter precisely for how they illustrate larger attempts to inscribe pop stars within broader meanings and understandings of consumption as vital aspects of empowerment and self-disclosure. For this reason, images of gay fans are central to understanding larger dynamics at work in the ways that media industries address consumption as fandom in the digital era.

Lady Gaga and her media team have innovated several fan management strategies within the transition to social media as a marketing platform for entertainers and brands. One example, the Monster Pit Key Contest, offers a portrait of how the intimate moorings of diva celebrity have been uniquely positioned for new forms of participatory fandom in the digital era. Between 2012 and 2013, Lady Gaga embarked on the rock-opera inspired concert tour for the *Born This Way* Ball whose pairing of a castle-themed stage with synth-heavy Euro-dance-pop beats was frequently characterized as a visual and sonic spectacle. The concert tour appeared at the height of what music critics and fans refer to as Lady Gaga's "imperial phase," a period associated with the

commercial peak of an artist's career and the height of their social influence.⁷⁰⁸ Among the sites of this participatory fandom at the concert, Lady Gaga's team incorporated fan experiences like the contest for the "Monster Pit Key" in which fans dressed "to Ball" in line for the concert would have the opportunity to win a fan necklace that granted them backstage access. This necklace granted the wearer not only spatial mobility at the concert but also the opportunity to be photographed for Lady Gaga's new social media site, "LittleMonsters.com." This fan contest is, of course, symbolic of older forms of exchanging fan labor for proximity to celebrity, a similar concept that can be observed in Madonna's MTV contest where fans produced their own "True Blue" (1986) music video. More specifically, within the lens of this contest, its language accentuated the queer undertones of Gaga's celebrity by its choice of verb, "to ball," that raises connotations of urban ballroom culture thereby drawing on subcultural capital from underground queer culture. In this way, Gaga's celebrity is put into the same queer genealogies of media production as Madonna's "Vogue" (1990) and Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) within the same moment that figures like RuPaul pioneered new opportunities in music and television on *The RuPaul Show* (1996-98) for VH1.

In many ways, these photographs of fans for the Monster Pit Key represent critical sites in which we can visualize the expressiveness of celebrity identification and this form of diva worship. Broadly, these images support the thesis that fascination with the Gaga phenomenon is itself *expressive* particularly in how these fans' sartorial choices attempted to communicate their readiness to ball as built around their perceptions of Gaga's celebrity. In these pictures, fans broadly wore unconventional materials, likely pulled from their existing wardrobes, to produce

⁷⁰⁸ This term was coined by Neil Tennant of the *Pet Shop Boys* to refer to periods of an artist's career where their creative and commercial peaks coincide.

their own Gaga-inspired outfits. One persistent theme across many different styles and expressions of self was a fascination with fabrics and items of clothing with strong queer connotations. Some fans wore denim jackets in various dyes with bandanas. A number of fans wore more official looking Gaga merchandise. One fan tucked a leather harness underneath his denim cut-off shirt. These subtle cues of queer self-presentation were built out of a fan investment in the Gaga persona that can be viewed more spectacularly in the one fan who wore a feather boa, while another dressed in drag. A couple fans wore leather jackets seeming to give further indication to the countercultural and expressive edge across many of these fan-photographs. In doing so, these photographs present direct phenomenon for understanding the ways in which celebrity personae are structured as models of queer subjectivity through fan address. Moreover, the expressiveness of these practices draws on a range of ways in which subjects call attention to their own subcultural specificities as larger outgrowths of non-digital practices of consumption, such as diva worship, as sites for self-expression.

Moreover, studies of social media require proper context of the ways in which such cheap, media production fits within larger branding and industrial agendas. This section tells the story of how Gaga and the self-representation of her fans illustrate how elements of diva celebrity and worship became compelling elements in the development of social media platforms. In this context, Gaga drew parallels between media consumption and political participation through her centering of an 'activist' worldview. This circumstance is noteworthy, given how early accounts of social media technologies like Facebook and Twitter frequently imbued their platforms with the promise of democratic fulfillment through events like the Arab Spring. Gaga's merging of new media participation with activism against a fraying anti-gay legal framework reflects not only the optimism that social media may bring about social change through the sheer power of networked

information sharing but also the opposite side of how music artists like Lady Gaga illustrated the participatory value of diva worship in the emergence of digital fandoms and publics. For this reason, this chapter argues that contemporary queer and fan scholars should ask how forms of social identity are constructed by the management and production of fandom today. And moreover, how have new digital publics allowed for wider representation of previously marginalized subjects? In addressing these concerns, I seek to examine how Gaga's digital construction of her fanbase, Little Monsters, is reflective of how forms of diva celebrity have become particularly vital to the worldbuilding of social media and why we must pay attention to how identities are represented within the diva's promotional and paratextual contexts.

Writing in *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, authors Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green consider the shifts in formations of audience with the arrival of more participatory forms of culture like social media and its influence on legacy media production. Their perspective is marked by their understanding that “the constructs of capitalism will greatly shape the creation and circulation of most media texts for the foreseeable future and that most people do not (and cannot) opt out of commercial culture.”⁷⁰⁹ Moving from this point, their work offers a compelling reading of our new digital landscape as one that stresses audience engagement. These engagement-based models of media production, in their words, posit the audience “as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value.”⁷¹⁰ Within this model, media industry approaches privilege audiences who engage in longer form relationships with media across multiple channels or mediums from television to music streaming. Recognizing this new logic is to understand more complex and distinct models of

⁷⁰⁹ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value in a Networked Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), xi.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

measuring such engagement. In older media industries, measures of participation were largely constructed around volumes of sale (*a la Billboard*), radio plays (now streams for platforms like Spotify), box office reports of tickets or rentals (Hollywood film/live performance), or Nielsen ratings (television) as various metrics for measuring economic participation with cultural production. In this new environment, older agencies of measuring like *Billboard* or Nielsen have updated their measurements; the former paying attention to new modes of digital consumption *a la* YouTube and Spotify in their measures of Top 40 charts, while the latter has incorporated new metrics to account for time-shifted viewing. Elsewhere in this new landscape, advertising industries attempt to control and discipline brand reach through measures of social media participation to understand the scope of influence or potential digital value of commercial partnerships. These circumstances matter precisely as they structure new logics to the production and branding of the diva and her gay public within this environment.

One traditional reading of the issue of media engagement has been to define it through blurred analytical categories of production and consumption.⁷¹¹ Within this reading, audiences not only share promotional content from celebrities but also produce original, personal commentary, culminating in our understanding of the ways that celebrity consumption in digital environments is a productive act. This reading of engagement, however, requires a more rigorous examination of the ways in which ideologies of consumption shape these practices. Writing about the nature of

⁷¹¹ One such example is Henry Jenkins et al. and their discussion of media spreadability: “Spreadability assumes a world where mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities. When material is produced according to a one-size-fits-all model, it imperfectly fits the needs of any given audience. Instead, audience members have to retrofit it to better serve their interests. As material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms. This continuous process of repurposing and recirculating is eroding the perceived divides between production and consumption.” See: Jenkins et al. *Spreadable Media*, 27.

consumer publics, Adam Arvidsson argues for a theory of consumption as *public action*.⁷¹² Considering new technological developments, his work narrates the development of consumer society as part of a broader diffusion of media technologies. With the distribution of video and digital cameras along with editing software, new dynamics of audience and media participation have greatly expanded, while the barriers for consumer participation in cultural production have greatly lowered. Understanding these developments, for Arvidsson, is to recognize critical ways that “the mediatization of consumer goods and social relations in general has greatly enhanced the ‘signifying power’ of consumer goods.” He adds, “by being inserted in a global media circuit, a branded item can condense meanings in new and highly efficient ways.”⁷¹³ Through this power of signification enters critical dynamics for understanding the ways in which broader rhetorics of cultural consumption via new media technologies take up understandings of participation as inscribed within larger processes of democratic deliberation. Understanding consumption as public action, a notion often disciplined by a range of promotional or paratextual media practices, is necessary for recognizing how forms of media engagement are disciplined through larger processes of cultural citizenship via economic participation.

Following from a theory of consumption as public action, Gaga can be said to illustrate how this branding of celebrity around activism accentuates valences of gay-themed consumption as part of broader fights against societal discrimination. At the same time, such ideologies of consumption as public action are attributed to the media technologies facilitating such

⁷¹² Adam Arvidsson, “The Potential of Consumer Publics,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013): 367-391.

⁷¹³ *Ibid*, 369. In this quote, Arvidsson is drawing on Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s work on the globalization of culture. See: Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

relationships. On September 16, 2010, Lady Gaga, then Twitter's most followed person, called out former presidential candidate John McCain:

SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN is attempting to stop the DON'T ASK DON'T TELL repeal vote this tuesday, with a filibuster. A Filibuster is a way to obstruct the Senate Floor from discussing or voting on a given LAW, + is essentially a tactic to hijack our debate. All hands on deck Lil Monsters: Key senate vote this Tues. on #DADT repeal. We need 60 senators. Call your senator now.⁷¹⁴

Such political organizing using Twitter reflects, in part, how parallels across media, technology, and politics have been exploited in the development of our new digital ecosystems online, especially as artists relate increasingly to their fans as active followers by reshaping traditions of cultural consumption and audience engagement. In recognizing this circumstance, the investment in producing images of queer participation in Lady Gaga's social media presence reveals for us a fuller appreciation of the shifts in industry discourse around identity in how social categories become actively produced online through self-identified queer or gay fandom.

To think about the ideology of self-empowerment and its connection with ideas about citizenship within Gaga fandom, it is important to recognize how it fits within a landscape of self-empowerment rhetoric within her work. There are precious few spaces where this rhetoric is made more obvious than within its live performance contexts, as the relationship between audience and performer has centered cathartic narratives of diva celebrity. Within this context, re-claimed narratives of the self through professional success are ways in which the emotional conditions of capitalism, celebrity, and media visibility become scrambled into points of self-identification with

⁷¹⁴ See: Elise Viebeck, "McCain on Lady Gaga: 'I'm Glad She's Paying Attention,'" *The Hill*, September 17, 2010, <https://thehill.com/blogs/twitter-room/other-news/119417-mccain-on-lady-gaga-im-glad-shes-paying-attention>.

media personae. When delivering an interview for *Cosmopolitan* after releasing *The Fame Monster*, Gaga took the opportunity to tell the story of her past boyfriend who had told her she'd never succeed at her dreams. His words to her that he hoped that she'd fail had been re-spun in the interview as a form of self-resilience: "I said to him someday you won't be able to order a cup of coffee without hearing about me."⁷¹⁵ Gaga's words, here, illustrate the structure and intensity of discourse surrounding the validation of being represented within mainstream, popular commercial media success through the gendered and heterosexual (though not exclusively) particularities of the bad boyfriend figure. Moreover, such statements position commercial visibility as part of the long path of personal resilience and (economic) triumph. Gaga returns to these motifs in her crowd work for *The Monster Ball*:

You know I didn't use to be brave. In fact, I wasn't very brave at all. But you have made me brave, little monsters. And New York made me brave. So now...I'm gonna be brave for you. Tonight I want you to forget all of your insecurities. I want you to reject anyone or anything that's ever made you feel like you don't belong or don't fit in or ever made you feel like you're not good enough or pretty enough or thin enough or can't sing well enough or dance well enough or can't write a song good enough or like you'll never win a Grammy or you'll never sell out Madison Square Garden! You just remember that you're a goddamn superstar and you were Born This Way!⁷¹⁶

Here, issues of survivalism, work ethic, and pursuit of the American dream all come together to situate the various symbolic and thematic registers that configure the celebrity-fan relationship.

⁷¹⁵ See: Christine Spines, "Lady Gaga Wants You," *Cosmopolitan*, February 27, 2010.

⁷¹⁶ *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden*.

In other moments, this discourse of cultural visibility transforms to include the brand recognition of a gay audience. Gaga turned from her story of the initial leg of her career commuting on the New York subway system to her various gigs to acknowledging her gay fans: “the only thing better than a unicorn is a gay unicorn.” The audience screams, and she retorts: “Oh you know what that means? All the New York gays came out to play.”⁷¹⁷ Her words are met with an enthusiastic crowd, for whom some of their cheers no doubt worked as a claiming of queer visibility with more pride and enthusiasm publicly than compared to the previous decade of American public life that had only recently seen the federal repeal of all state sodomy laws in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003). While in many ways, these acts of speech represent a calling and coming out of a gay market identification, it must be recognized within these conditions as an appropriated language of cultural visibility particularly figured around queerness through gayness. Within these moments, the diva claims not just a gay public but re-articulates older formulations of the diva-gay fan relationship as a broader force of female celebrity identification since the 1960s. Situated within such claiming of her audience and her self’s visibility, these interstitial moments provide discrete encounters in which celebrity claims a sense of representativeness for its audience by drawing on the significance of queer visibility.

Moreover, this moment in discourse presents the perpetually tense reconciliation of a politics of difference and assimilation, particularly when the former is articulated in pursuit of the latter’s possibilities in the cultural marketplace. Here, I advise rejecting an attempt to disentangle critical theories of difference and industries of assimilation; to do so, I would argue, obscures the larger ways in which identity and its politics have been re-figured by the media industries and the diva as an entrepreneurial queen of this marketplace. Critical engagements in this direction have

⁷¹⁷ *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden.*

tended to rehearse the habit of interrogating the cultural ideologies of popular culture in ways that demand more authenticity of it. Decidedly, popular commercial culture can never be separated from these anxieties of the search for authenticity, particularly through the ways that such a term as authenticity draws on associations of anti-commercialism. To be commodified, within this argument, is to be displaced from authenticity. Policing the boundaries of style in attempts to cultivate a more authentic feel is to reduce histories of industry branding and the management of cultural discourse into issues of style alone. Within our own cultural conditions, there is a heightened expectation – perhaps even the specific ideology of our media production – that media has the duty to be *representative*, to be reflective of its audience, and that this relationship built around claims of representativeness should be the subject of public relations, advertising, and publicity management of specific audiences as kinds of constituencies themselves that feed into larger questions of culture, politics, and audience formation. Moving to recognize this circumstance, I place emphasis on the ways that new media publicity and previous cultural discourses, rooted by the transformations of market segmentation, enjoined together in ways that marked participation in the cultural marketplace as a broader citizenship practice built around themes of cultural belonging.

Writing in the aftermath of *Born This Way*'s release, Ben Sisario of *The New York Times* understood the success of Gaga's album as generated by a specific kind of paradox for the music industry. Remarking upon this circumstance, Sisario writes: "Albums sell less and less well every year, but as a marketing tool they are now more important than ever."⁷¹⁸ This paradox reflected the state of popular music as a commodity that expanded across touring opportunities,

⁷¹⁸ Ben Sisario, "In Lady Gaga's Album, Evidence of a New Order," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/02/arts/music/lady-gagas-born-this-way-shows-albums-new-role.html>.

endorsements, and merchandise, yet its central product was perceived as having less and less economic return. Responding to this new circumstance, music celebrities have endeavored to find new economic opportunities by exploiting their built-in audience as a commodity for other brand partners. During 2011, Lady Gaga's manager, Troy Carter, was responsible for generating different business deals with tech start-up companies that reflected the overall value of Gaga's brand in the digital space. The album, in its first week, sold approximately 1.1 million copies, thanks in part to a deal with Amazon to sell the digital album for \$0.99 that accounted for nearly two thirds of the total volume of sales. Another example, Lady Gaga partnered with social media game-maker Zynga, responsible for such games as FarmVille, on the project "Gagaville." In this game extension, Facebook users were able to visit the superstar's neighboring town to look at the Gaga-themed content and uncover new music from *Born This Way* before its release. In fact, the album became packaged in Zynga's sale of game cards with a free download of the album at Best Buy. About this collaboration, Lady Gaga extolled its virtues by phrasing it through intimate terms built around exclusivity:

I want to celebrate and share 'Born This Way' with my little monsters in a special way that's never been done before... Zynga has created a magical place in FarmVille where my fans can come play, and be the first to listen to the album.⁷¹⁹

Such partnerships reflected the broader ways in which cultural producers were being knit into the digital networks of social media. Between these Amazon and Zynga partnerships, such deals with emerging technological players reflected contemporary navigations of broader commercial challenges of music's commodified relationship to its audience.

⁷¹⁹ Leena Rao, "GagaVille: Zynga and Lady Gaga Announce Major Partnership," *TechCrunch*, May 10, 2011, <https://techcrunch.com/2011/05/10/gagaville-zynga-and-lady-gaga-announce-major-branding-deal>.

Positioned within this environment, monickers like "Little Monsters," however, were not just an expression of celebrity-fan intimacy alone. Such nicknames represented broader industry trends about the growing calculation of fandom within a digital media landscape premised on participatory forms of interaction with media. The emphasis on communities of fans can be observed in the transition of popular music's stars onto these social media platforms. Throughout 2009, Lady Gaga's Twitter account repeatedly spoke directly to her fans, the Little Monsters, from the road as she toured her album *The Fame*. Her statements were intimate, as she expressed wanting to "wrap my arms around my little monsters" when attributing them credit for *The Fame* being the first album with four number one radio hits.⁷²⁰ More broadly, cultural commentators like *The Atlantic*'s Jason Richards questioned the tribal state of pop music in 2012, when considering the labeling of fan groups like the "Katy Cats," "Beliebers," "Swifties," and "Directioners."⁷²¹ During this same period, digital celebrity journalism and marketing content producers like PopCrush began to engage these groups through their use of reader polls in the development of the "Best Fan Base—Readers Poll," which sought to generate traffic from these networks of celebrity fans.⁷²² Within these fan communities, users were compelled to recruit their fellow fans to go vote in earning the crown of best fan base—a media strategy that indicates how entertainment marketing borrows its metaphors from the political process.

These fan bases were part of a discourse that reflected the economic and marketing value of these networked platforms, as algorithms and hashtags worked arduously to extend and manage

⁷²⁰ Lady Gaga, "THE FAME is the first album in history to have four #1 radio hits! i wish i could wrap my arms around my little monsters, the reason is u.xx," *Twitter*, November 3, 2009, <https://twitter.com/ladygaga/status/5393389092>.

⁷²¹ Jason Richards, "Beliebers, Directioners, Barbz: What's With Pop's Fanbase Nickname Craze?" *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/08/beliebers-directioners-barbz-whats-with-pops-fanbase-nickname-craze/260798/>.

⁷²² Cristin Maher, "Best Fan Base – Readers Poll," *PopCrush*, March 13, 2012, <https://popcrush.com/best-fan-base-readers-poll>.

the visibility of entertainment brands and personalities online. When iHeartRadio's music awards ceremony announced its nominations in February 2014, the organizers drew on this similar metaphor of fandom in their introduction of the category, "Best Fan Army."⁷²³ Fittingly, the Rihanna Navy, the Barbadian-performer's name for her fan community, would become the recipient of this industry award. Since 2014, 5 Seconds of Summer's 5SOSFam (2015), Justin Bieber's Beliebers (2016), Fifth Harmony's Harmonizers (2017), and BTS's BTSArmy (2018, 2019) have all taken home the prize. While such awards could be considered part of the promotional detritus of celebrity's industrial underpinnings, the introduction of this prize reflects the growth and transformation of how the music industry connects to digital fan communities in the wake of social media marketing. The success of female pop stars on social media, here, reflects their attempts to streamline and augment their audience reach by increasing the feeling of intimacy with their fans via new technologies and older cultures of diva worship.

Within these circumstances, Lady Gaga and her manager Troy Carter worked arduously to assert her brand potential for tech venture capitalism. One significant move, though the startup eventually failed, was Gaga and Carter's investment in new social media platforms, such as Backplane in which the artist was reported to have a 20% stake.⁷²⁴ Backplane's goal was "to create a communities platform combining calendar, email and social networking functions, including Facebook and Twitter, to allow groups ranging from Girl Scout troops to celebrity fan clubs to communicate seamlessly."⁷²⁵ The targeted users on the platform were supposed to be self-

⁷²³ "Clear Channel to Debut 'iHeartRadio Music Awards,'" *New York Times*, February 26, 2014.

⁷²⁴ Annie Lowrey, "Troy Carter, Business Manager for Lady Gaga," *Slate*, July 18, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/top_right/2011/07/troy_carter_business_manager_for_lady_gaga.html.

⁷²⁵ Lizette Chapman, "'Jedi Council' And Lady Gaga's Team To Help Menlo Seed Start-Ups," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-VCDB-11448>.

identified fans. Backplane reflected, for Carter, the potential of artists having more direct control over consumer data, stating:

Up until this point, we've been data dumb... If a kid goes and buys a CD at a Best Buy, we have no idea who the person is, how many times they listen to it, or anything like that. But we're building to the point where one day we're going to have access to all of the data. There will be a time where we'll be able to release music through the Backplane, where we'll be able to release music videos through there, we're going to be able to sell all our tickets through there.⁷²⁶

Carter's comments, thus, signify the larger aims of this industrial movement towards new opportunities on social media as having the opportunity for re-centralizing entrepreneurial control over information flows of media. Through this framing, the investment in Backplane reflected the perceived value of the artist's branded relationship to her public as part of an attempt to maintain control over that relationship's digital data.

In interviews, Carter would spin the story of their ventures into social media originating from Lady Gaga's viewing of *The Social Network* (2010) on the Sony lot. After finishing the film, she, allegedly, called her manager to ask whether a social network would be possible for her fans. Indeed, her fans were already organizing on the internet in spaces like Gaga Daily, Gaga News, and Lady-Gaga.net, where fans communicated around upcoming releases and fan memes about their central interest in being fans of Gaga.⁷²⁷ These venues themselves were not isolated from

⁷²⁶ Neal Pollack, "How Lady Gaga's Manager Reinvented the Celebrity Game with Social Media," *WiredUK*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/troy-carter>.

⁷²⁷ When looking through the forums of *GagaDaily*, user "Joshuaaaa" presented his relationship with Lady Gaga through the permission structure she provided for his sense of difference, stating "when I was very young I always felt different and Gaga always made me feel like its ok to me <3 same reason why many years later."⁷²⁷ Others, displaying the same sense of tongue-and-cheek behavior, positioned their investment as a clear construct of their sexual identity, as user PunkTheFunk cut to the heart of the matter with his justification for stanning Gaga as "My

Carter and Gaga's work as they and their staff regularly communicated with fans on these sites to distribute information about tours and perform impression management. Such interactions, of course, highlight forms of disciplining the terms of consumption for audiences, hyping fans to purchase concert tickets or to learn more about recent Gaga gossip.⁷²⁸ Remarketing upon the overall success of their digital strategy and their eyes on new tech ventures like Backplane, one Google VP, Gary Briggs, would state: "Troy and Gaga are doing things with communications and fan relationships that we haven't really seen before."⁷²⁹ This comment, moreover, reflected the growing partnerships between music industry and Silicon Valley tech players during the expansion of social media and the re-centered industry attention on forms of music fandom as organized through technology. One way to explain the thinking of such partnerships has much to do with the existing audience numbers for entertainers on the early platform, as during her talks to invest in the company, Lady Gaga had approximately ten million followers on Twitter and Facebook, which grew significantly in the years following their investment. Such audience portfolios made it attractive for digital ventures to re-wire the social media space by exploiting entertainers like Lady Gaga as part of their technology brand's development and public outreach. In doing so, these new commercial technologies reflected the strength of diva celebrity in organizing users and audiences for new media technologies, just as what occurred with the introduction of the phonograph recording industry and the Hollywood feature film as discussed earlier in this dissertation.

Media industry examples like Backplane reflect how fan communities have become increasingly the target of commercial industry over the past three decades of the internet. As Nancy

homosexuality." See: "What Made You Stan Lady Gaga?" *GagaDaily*, August 8, 2012, <https://gagadaily.com/forums/topic/300405-what-made-you-stan-lady-gaga>.

⁷²⁸ Pollack, "How Lady Gaga's Manager Reinvented the Celebrity Game with Social Media."

⁷²⁹ Sheila Shayon, "Lady Gaga and Eric Schmidt Board the Backplane," *BrandChannel*, June 7, 2011, <https://www.brandchannel.com/2011/06/07/lady-gaga-and-eric-schmidt-board-the-backplane>.

K. Baym (2018) details, the rise of networked computing and the internet created opportunities for organizing music fandom into digital communities. In its early days, such participatory forms of fandom were organized around the margins of the internet, accessible through decentralized text-based forums like group-sharing note files and bulletin boards that were often city specific. With the rise of the hyperlinked World Wide Web, fandom was accessed through online service providers and other amateur-run HTML websites. Today, outlets for fandom have become concentrated through social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Fandom is arguably more public; no longer is it organized by fan-created content on local platforms. The net effect has been a growing commercialization of these communities with numerous consequences on archetypes of music fandom and how technological formations of communities reflect shifts in industrial understandings of fandom. New technologies for fan engagement have illustrated how social media technology, moreover, has scrambled traditional notions of presence and proximity. For instance, Periscope, a video streaming app acquired by Twitter, allowed celebrity-users to stream themselves 'live' to talk with their fans. The ability to go live with fans is a functionality that appeared across a whole host of other social media platforms like Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram around the middle of the 2010s. As celebrities have used these live sessions to broadcast not only intimate (and sometimes tedious) details of their lives, these live sessions have served the purpose of creating systems of information delivery for fan communities more directly controlled by celebrities and their brand partners.

Backplane CEO Matt Michelsen drew distinctions on behalf of his company with other platforms for their failures at providing proper levels of engagement for brands. Such measures of engagement were the principal concern for the company. Throughout its short stint, Backplane focused, in Michelsen's words, on issues of fan management by learning about user behavior,

psychology, and the sociology of fan community.⁷³⁰ Such focuses represent the ways in which older themes of psychographic categories from previous eras of market segmentation have been reconstituted in the social media era. In the *WiredUK* profile of Troy Carter, Michelsen talked about the position of large social movements – political, cultural, religious – as built around group identities first. Michelsen’s language, in fact, would point to one central way in which ideologies of diva worship fit within this developing technological landscape: “People are not Twitterers or Facebookers...They’re Deadheads. They’re Christians. You have to create an identity for people within that authentic experience.”⁷³¹ This approach, moreover, was reflected in the ensuing development of Backplane’s site for Lady Gaga, as it was advanced by centering queer self-presentational strategies through contests like The Monster Pit Key.

Launched in beta-testing in February 2012, the design of the Little Monsters site by Backplane was characterized as a hodgepodge of existing social media networks. Its platform, in fact, worked to bring together various niche communities, as each artist would grow to be responsible for their own portal on the website. Lady Gaga herself would develop her own site during this partnership, which led to a social media networking site within Backplane known as “LittleMonsters.com.” This site was where images of the Monster Pit Key contest were initially uploaded, reflecting the ways in which Lady Gaga and her team brought fans from more analog venues of performance via a live concert into the performance of fandom online via new social media sites. Understanding this dynamic is critical when recognizing the ways in which political

⁷³⁰ Rebecca Grant, “Backed By Lady Gaga & Coca Cola, Backplane Helps Big Brands Build Communities,” *VentureBeat*, August 31, 2013, <https://venturebeat.com/2013/08/21/backed-by-lady-gaga-coca-cola-backplane-helps-big-brands-build-communities>.

⁷³¹ Neal Pollack, “How Lady Gaga’s Manager Reinvented the Celebrity Game with Social Media.”

and cultural themes of Gaga's celebrity mixed with technological and industrial agendas as they were developing within the music industry in the early 2010s.

Following from this case study, these ideologies of participation within social media are important to recognize when understanding the ways in which the building of person brands on such platforms connect to larger systems of culture. Writing in *The Culture of Connectivity*, José van Dijck supports this emphasis in her recognition of the longer technological histories within which social media has been inscribed. One example in this genealogy is the ad campaign for Apple computers in 1984 that stressed themes of empowerment, which Dijck has described as casting “the company as a rebel amid powerful computer industries and, by implication, positioned the Mac customer as a denizen of the counter culture.”⁷³² In fact, this ideology of empowerment, that van Dijck writes about in her book, is one that frequently marked the narratives about the arrival of Web 2.0, particularly when noting *Time*'s decision to name “You” as its person of the year in 2006, stating: “Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.”⁷³³ Moreover, this emphasis on “You” was not merely journalistic. In fact, most slogans of social media companies implicitly wrote their copy in the second person, an example of how new media technologies developed and shaped existing advertising practice in their privileging of an active user base. Reflected in its company's naming, YouTube, for example, regularly encouraged its users to “Broadcast Yourself,” while spending money on developing its own microcelebrity star system. Such microcelebrities were built into the advertising rhetoric of such platforms, as their faces splashed on city billboards and dramatic news reports of their earnings situated social media technologies as a space of amateur self-revelation by drawing on older mythologies of star

⁷³² José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

⁷³³ Lev Grossman, “You — Yes, You — Are TIME's Person of the Year,” *Time*, December 25, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>.

discovery narratives formed by early Hollywood. In many ways, these incidents function as discrete examples of the ways in which new social media technologies aimed to define consumer participation around themes of empowerment, reflecting cultural, political, and technological progress as mutually articulated in advertising rhetoric. These dynamics, crucially, are not so dissimilar from the rhetoric of empowerment that marked Lady Gaga's navigation of a gay fandom by centering political themes and social media outreach in the advancement of her celebrity.

Conclusion:

Reviewing this history of the formation of the gay market and its relationship to ideologies of diva worship is to understand, in a certain sense, the ways in which core aspects of identity – here figured as sexuality – have themselves become subjected to the forces of branding in ways that offer clearer terms for understanding our contemporary era. In analyzing this image of the gay fan, its history illustrates how early models of gay celebrity served as vital mythologies in the immediate aftermath of the organizing moment that was the Stonewall Riots. In the 1960s, journalistic discourses of the gay fan were often treated, though more sympathetically, through discourses informed by latently Freudian understandings of gay sexuality as gender inversion, a motif that had occupied much of the attempts at “gay” branding of early Hollywood stars like William Haines. In this way, Judy Garland's cult status, while informed by a certain grassroots subcultural appeal, cannot remain untethered from that period's sexual politics. Moving into the 1970s, the queer energy of Gay Liberation and its relationship to an identifiable mainstream was made possible by new constitutional protections around commercial speech. Synthesizing vaudeville and slumming traditions of the 1920s to 1930s New York, new public stars like Bette Midler, as well as older performers operating within genre constructions of blackness via disco,

jazz, and blues, filtered into explicitly gay contexts and venues for the development of a new commercial base and brand within the mainstream.

Modern diva worship is inseparable from this tradition. Such dynamics are observable in the development of the diva's gay public within branding techniques developed in the 1970s. As this aspect of queer 1970s culture filtered into the programming of television, gay subcultural references were more common, particularly arranged around divas like Cher. Within this tradition of cultural representation, the gay fan, by the century's end, was approached with a privileged status by diva celebrities, as well as by advertisers and expanded forms of media production that allowed for more complex audience formations than decades earlier. Leading to programs like *Will & Grace*, key mythologies, honed in part by a pre-Stonewall environment, were re-articulated with the diva emerging as a central player in discussions of branding, merchandising, and audience appeal to the gay community as a way of rendering such programming as authentic for non-gay audiences. Of the re-articulated motifs of pseudo-psychiatric discourses about homosexuality, one has been the juxtaposition of queer and gendered visibility as parallel and mutually articulated cultural phenomenon. The negotiation of this gay-programming, as it was further developed in the 2000s by NBC's Bravo, moreover, illustrates the ways in which the gay audience has been seen as valuable not only in terms of itself but as a marker of taste in media industry's commercial address to heterosexual, female audiences.

Moving into the 2010s, the diva has continued in this direction. Distinctions between a gay audience vs. gay-themed branding have blurred due to the more interactive conditions of social media and the more broadscale acceptance of LGBTQ rights. Henry Jenkins et al. have considered the ways in which new digital technologies, particularly social media, were championed for their

democratizing capabilities of community-building.⁷³⁴ Positioned within this rhetoric were new developments in audience formations premised, in part, around the democratic promises of digital media, despite its growing conglomeration. In this era, the rhetoric of freedom and self-empowerment through the cultural marketplace paralleled the enhanced turn towards fandom as a strategy of commercial engagement for audiences. Reflecting this embrace of fan ideologies of media consumption, Robert Kozinets has argued that this new environment has produced far fewer stigmatic depictions of fandom as these consumer identities have become synthesized by contemporary market strategies in a phenomenon he terms “fan creep.”⁷³⁵ Kozinets argues that these shifting calculations, in many ways, have driven business strategy of corporate entertainment through Disney’s high-profile acquisitions of fan-favorite franchises as Star Wars and Marvel over the course of the 2010s.

In some senses, the re-investment in the figure of the gay fan reflects broader developments of the 2010s about the re-centered position of consumers within a new technological landscape. Representing more precise targeting of consumers through AI algorithms, the renewed use of gay fans and gay consumers, moreover, represents the successful development of media strategies from the era of market segmentation, where more sophisticated targeting of consumer niches promised audiences more specific programming relevant to their interests. Positioned within this rhetoric were themes of gay visibility fandom images directly tied to enhanced appeals for social tolerance. Within this environment, such modes of diva fandom premised themselves on branding celebrity through such rubrics of visibility in ways that positioned diva worship as its own kind of citizenship practice. In doing so, diva celebrity, within the context of the 2010s, is a compelling point of entry

⁷³⁴ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media*, xii.

⁷³⁵ Robert V. Kozinets, “Fan Creep: Why Brands Suddenly Need “Fans,”” in *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 162.

to thinking about the related themes of gay political visibility, technological utopianism, and neoliberal market-based solutions for handling questions of representation and national citizenship.

Chapter Five: The Postfeminist Diva: Economies of Visibility in Recession-era Biographic Documentaries

This dissertation has examined the brand history of the diva in its myriad incarnations through a highly complex and convergent media industry from the early 20th-century to the first decades of the 21st-century. In doing so, I have sought to analyze the performance of gendered celebrity as a foundational aspect of the public relations battles that illustrate how performers enhance their own celebrity. In my previous chapters, I situated the development of gendered and racialized individuality of the diva within the emergence of media industries in the late 19th-century to new forms of production by broadcast and cable television, as well as the network of ramifications these developments had in the figure of the diva as a mediated cultural discourse. It has been my argument, in part, that the diva's branded nature represents a continued history of the ways in which cultural commodities promise audiences cultural uplift through the prism of historical debates about gender, sexuality, and race within a diverse media industry. Here, I seek to position the development of celebrity biographic documentaries in terms of their public relations function. Within this view, these films humanize the diva as a laboring subject caught within the forms of gendered surveillance found in capitalist media industry.

Making allusion to the feminist potential of these divas as gendered laborers, such documentaries can be studied as examples of postfeminist culture, a term referring to practices, texts, and ideologies that re-deploy, in Sarah Banet-Weiser's terms, liberal feminist discourses "such as freedom, choice, and independence," and incorporates such values "into a wide array of media, merchandising, and consumer participation."⁷³⁶ In this material culture, postfeminist

⁷³⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism," *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2018): 153.

ideology typically reflects latent feminist sentiment, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have observed its tendency to “incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism” by working to “commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.”⁷³⁷ Rosalind Gill, in particular, has explored how this gendered rhetoric itself bears a strong resemblance to neoliberalism in its transition from a mode of rationality to a mode of self-governmentality that addresses individuals as “entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating, and self-regulating,” a dynamic that will be explored further throughout this chapter.⁷³⁸

Appearing in full force since the 1980s, postfeminism has augured a latently feminist popular culture in its branded address to women and their empowerment that highlights a tendency to elevate, in Tasker and Negra’s words, “consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents.”⁷³⁹ Interrogations of postfeminist culture have routinely revealed its own participation with an emphatic form of individualism as the locus of political and cultural concern, eschewing some of the more collective-oriented approaches found in second-wave feminism, even while recognizing the tensions around race, class, and sexuality that marked 1970s women-led activism.⁷⁴⁰ These feminist connotations of popular culture, particularly evident in the range of independent and commercial 1990s “girl power” media that Gayle Wald and Catherine Driscoll have studied among others are now more explicitly addressed in post-recession divas like Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Taylor Swift.⁷⁴¹ Media production, as viewed by their celebrity, responded to

⁷³⁷ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” *Interrogating Post-feminism*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁷³⁸ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007): 163.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁴⁰ For a strong overview of these debates and tensions, see: Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second-Wave to ‘Post-Feminism,’* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995).

⁷⁴¹ See: Gayle Wald, “Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1998): 585-610; See: Catherine Driscoll, “Girl Culture,

industrial imaginings of the millennial generation. This demographic, having grown up on such “girl power” media, has been viewed as more politically and socially conscious than previous generations, though in retrospect such interest in the anti-corporatism of millennials also recalls that of their predecessors the “MTV generation” or “slacker generation,” terms that marked the media industry’s embrace and representation of Generation X.⁷⁴²

In recent documentaries as *Gaga: Five Foot Two* (2017) and *Miss Americana* (2020), the diva persona is characterized by the forms of surveillance that mark the female performer and laborer in the cultural industries while narrating her ability to overcome such forms of surveillance and master her own self as an empowered subject. Within this form of media production, there is a regular tendency to essentialize understandings of gender in the cultural industries by working to make appeals to vague notions and cornerstones of liberal feminist thought from previous decades. Yet while taking on the conditions of misogyny that continue to mark the gendered labor conditions of the media industries, these documentaries fail to interrogate systemic inequities amongst women in media production. Rather, they routinely gather associations of feminist sentiment as constitutive components of entrepreneurial branding. In doing so, these textual practices of celebrity identification and idol worship mask imbalances between distinct classes of women in media industries while working to situate larger understandings of political progress via cultural consumption. This relationship is pivotal for understanding the braiding of media brands and politics that has marked much of the 2010s.

Revenge, and Global Capitalism: Cybergirls, Riot grrls, Spice Girls,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 29 (1999): 173-193.

⁷⁴² For a discussion of what has been termed “narrowcasting feminism” on cable channels like MTV, see: Laura Ivins-Hulley, “Narrowcasting Feminism: MTV’s *Daria*,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (2015): 1198-1212.

Pop star documentaries function to develop the celebrity autobiography in ways that demonstrate complex configurations of branding, advertising, and managing the public images of these gendered stars to their various publics. Developing ‘public’ knowledge of these figures in relation to broader imaginings of gender, labor, and entrepreneurial capitalism, these documentaries emphasize the triumphalism of these celebrities as indices of a type of contemporary girl power while denying their explicit cultural privileges and commitments to these very same systems of gendered surveillance. In these documentaries, the entrepreneurial diva comes to function as a laboring subject under these gendered conditions of the media industries, working to legitimize entrepreneurial success by celebrating mastery of these onerous cultural conditions for women. Drawing on the history of cinema vérité and music documentaries from the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary divas have turned to observational documentary since the 1990s as a concrete strategy for rendering their cultural commitments as legible to media audiences. These films include *Truth or Dare* (Alek Keshishian), *White Diamond* (William Baker, 2007), *Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert* (Bruce Hendricks, 2008), *Part of Me* (Jane Lipsitz and Dan Cutforth, 2012), *Life is But a Dream* (Ed Burke, 2013), *Five Feet Two* (Chris Moukarbel, 2017), *Rainbow* (Lagan Sebert and Kevin Hayden, 2018), *Homecoming* (Ed Burke, 2019), and *Miss Americana* (Lana Wilson, 2009) among others. Through this archive of music documentary, the diva comes to function as a resilient figure of contemporary media culture whose celebrity speaks to the individuated resilience and grit needed of female entrepreneurs. Despite speaking to popular conditions of misogyny, these documentaries routinely take up the pop star within dominant traditions of individualism in American culture that center the diva’s own meritocratic striving as a representative narrative within the larger contestations of class legitimacy that have marked the period of not only neoliberalism but its apparent failings during

the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009. In this moment, certain national understandings of class striving faltered as the traditional symbol of the nuclear family – the home – and its related fantasies of economic self-determination came to be the center of financial ruin for American families. The documentaries of this study can be said to present the diva as a figure of empowerment within ideologies of self-determination that have been threatened during a time of widening material inequalities in the U.S. In recognizing these economic dimensions within the branding of gendered labor in recent pop star documentaries, this chapter seeks to understand the ways in which the gendered impulses of celebrity branding demonstrate older formations of American individualism and its relationship to legitimizing class hierarchies, hearkening back to the inequities generated out of the original industrial revolution and the series of individualist meritocratic texts about class-striving that were written in its wake.

These individualistic impulses are not merely genealogical, as these media productions arrive via contemporary class conditions of a U.S. society that has seen new heights of wealth inequality between the rich and poor. To this point, the Pew Research Center has found that the wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016, whereby it was found that the top 5% held 248 times as much wealth than the median in 2016, as compared to 114 times as much in 1989.⁷⁴³ The digital nature of social media, moreover, has allowed for the growth of new forms of class consciousness outside of traditional commercial media, a dynamic that was substantively put to use during the #OccupyWallStreet protests, which has been viewed as an analogous form of digital protest in the U.S. as the Arab Spring.⁷⁴⁴ In

⁷⁴³ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar, "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority," Pew Research Center, January 2020.

⁷⁴⁴ For a discussion of how Occupy Wall Street used a variety of digital technologies as Facebook, Twitter, and others, see: Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Demands and the New Political," in *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64-93.

recognizing these conditions, this chapter seeks to understand how these documentaries represent female pop star entrepreneurs through the visibility of their labor and the labor of their visibility. Importantly, this visibility is situated within discourses of gender inequities that often render their economic privilege invisible. Using a discursive analysis, I locate how these documentaries both legitimize and sentimentalize the diva as the subject of media visibility that brings a sense of emotional intimacy and identification with her celebrity. This identification, to be clear, is often informed through the exploitation of autobiographical elements and details that dramatize the pop star's journey as a rags-to-riches narrative, a dominant motif in U.S. cultural ideologies that are fixated on notions of personal responsibility as a cornerstone of meritocratic striving. These notions routinely displace critical attention to the structural forms of privilege – vis-à-vis whiteness, attractiveness, and wealth – that inform the maintenance and development of stardom within the national and global context of U.S. media. This emptying of structural forms of privilege is embodied by the diva's representation in music documentaries precisely as it renders certain forms of privilege as invisible by pursuing the tensions around women's visibility in the media industries. Focusing on this visibility, cultural feminism as branding exercise, while a potent example of extra-political dynamics of social change, is severely limited, as these conditions of visibility privilege empowered subjects whose celebrity is always-already a function of their own visibility. In analyzing these representations, I explore the paradox of feminist sentiment in recent celebrity branding documentaries, wherein such critical absences speak to the longer histories of womanhood in the United States as a universalized identity that obscures broader formations of class, race, and sexuality that cut across issues of gender.

This chapter concludes with an analysis of how recent documentaries position the diva as herself a laborer within the gendered conditions of the cultural industries: Katy Perry in Jane

Lipsitz & Dan Cutforth's *Part of Me* (2012) as well as Taylor Swift in Lana Wilson's *Miss Americana* (2020). *Part of Me* is an autobiographical documentary and concert film about the pop star Katy Perry during her worldwide California Dreams Tour from February 2011 to January 2012, which chronicles her path to finding her own sense of self in the music industry despite the pressures of branding and marketing experts who didn't originally see her own value. Produced for Netflix, *Miss Americana* highlights Taylor Swift's path to declaring her political independence, while depicting the behind-the-scenes journey of the singer's decision to endorse Democrat Phil Bredesen in the 2018 U.S. Senate Election in Tennessee, as she finished her album, *Lover* (2019), that explicitly addressed Swift's LGBTQ political activism. In these analyses, I examine how these documentaries take up the figure of the diva as a gendered laborer in the media industries. Moreover, my analysis stresses how these films work to minimize the exceptional circumstances and careers of these performers to humanize them within the visible display of their labor within a media industry that regularly denigrates women, thus appealing to embodied experiences of female precarity, insecure labor, and feelings of surveillance in their audience. It is these types of embodied experience that, thus, directly inform the diva's position within global systems of capital production. Through these branding opportunities, these music documentaries underscore the tensions of being a woman in the media industries, working to legitimize and rationalize audience investment in these personalities by drawing on popular understandings of female precarity in the workplace. By acknowledging these tensions, I explore how such postfeminist documentaries reproduce key class mythologies central to the meritocratic underpinnings of neoliberalism and work to create audience identification with female cultural entrepreneurs as embodied representations of feminist aspiration and feeling. In doing so, the archive of diva documentaries comes to illustrate the ways in which the gendered rhetoric of empowerment itself relates to longer

histories of class fictions within the U.S. context, demonstrating the ways in which key ‘American’ myths have not only adapted but co-opted critiques of feminist thought in order to re-constitute a narrowed form of feminism within the confines of consumer culture.

Empowerment and Neoliberal Feminism:

Throughout the 2010s, cultural ideologies of feminism have been viewed as ascendant within popular culture, precisely as it came to be the central motif of Beyoncé’s self-titled album *Beyoncé* (2013). Her peers followed in the intervening years in forging this brand association. Taylor Swift announced her feminist identity in the public relations battle for her official pop music debut in *1989* (2014), a few months after Katy Perry had explicitly revised her own stance on feminism, admitting in a radio interview: “A feminist? ... I used to not really understand what that word meant, and now that I do, it just means that I love myself as a female and I also love men.”⁷⁴⁵ These examples of interest in feminism by celebrity entrepreneurs like Beyoncé, Swift, and Perry should not be isolated from their own specific class position, suggesting how the early part of the 2010s was preoccupied with not only renewed imaginings about the pop star diva but also more specifically the feminist subject within late capitalism. Commenting on related trends, Catherine Rottenberg has read this new feminist subject as neoliberal for how despite this figure’s awareness of current inequalities she “disavows the social, cultural, and economic forces producing this inequality but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-caring,” thus converting “continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.”⁷⁴⁶ David Harvey has described neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial

⁷⁴⁵ Laura Stampler, “Katy Perry: Maybe I Am a Feminist After All,” *Time*, March 18, 2014, <https://time.com/28554/katy-perry-feminist-after-all-confused>.

⁷⁴⁶ Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” 3.

freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade,” which has principally been advanced in the United States via Reaganism through a combination of deregulation, privatization, and austerity.⁷⁴⁷

Neoliberalism repudiates the Keynesian welfare state, as Wendy Brown argues, that flourished in the U.S. during the New Deal period as part of the public policy that managed and prevented economic recessions.⁷⁴⁸ Instead, neoliberalism comes to function as a form of political rationality in its privileging of the individual entrepreneur in the deregulation of the market in pursuance of a radical market freedom without state interference. Within this regime, neoliberalism produces subjects, forms of citizenship, and behavior where morality is viewed through the lens of what Wendy Brown describes as:

...rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences. In so doing, it also carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action—for example, lack of skills, education, and childcare in a period of high unemployment and limited welfare benefits.⁷⁴⁹

Recognizing the rationality of neoliberalism as built around the logic of self-governance and individual responsibility is particularly key for understanding the types of post-recession feminism that flourished in this moment. In these documentaries, I examine the marshalling of a form of gendered political consciousness that emphasizes economic self-determination of individual female entrepreneurs at the expense of larger and more systemic critiques about the racial and class intersections that produce gender as a lived experience.

⁷⁴⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

⁷⁴⁸ Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37-38.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 42-43.

Foundational to early interventions in both film and media studies, feminist scholars have continued to track the critical framings of gender produced by popular media culture. Specifically, scholars like Tania Modleski (1991), Angela McRobbie (2004; 2009), Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2005; 2007; 2009), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2006; 2018; 2020), Rosalind Gill (2007; 2013; 2016), Tanya Ann Kennedy (2017), and Catherine Rottenberg (2017; 2018) have explored these intersections between postfeminism and neoliberalism.⁷⁵⁰ For example, Catherine Rottenberg's *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* has tracked this emergence of a new popular form of feminism marked by its neoliberal emphasis on the individual that has eschewed interests in a collective struggle around women's social justice activism in order to center questions of balancing female labor and maternal care outside of critical frameworks of liberation. Representative examples of this phenomenon include semi-recent memoirs as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) to Ivanka Trump's *Women Who Work* (2017). In both autobiographic texts, a version of a middle and upper-class feminism is advanced as it relates to conditions of white-collar work, interrogating the internal and external pressures that women face when succeeding in

⁷⁵⁰ See: Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 1991); Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004): 255-264; Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London, UK and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009); Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Winter 2005): 107-110; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer, "I just want to be me again!": Beauty Pageants, Reality Television and Post-feminism," *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2006): 255-272; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism, and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation," *Feminist Theory*, Vol 21, No. 1 (2020): 3-24; Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007): 147-166; Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2011); Rosalind Gill, "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2016): 610-630; Tanya Ann Kennedy, *Historicizing Post-Discourses: Postfeminism and Postracialism in United States Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017); Catherine Rottenberg, "Neoliberal Feminism and the Future of Human Capital," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2017): 329-348; Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

the workplace, while often minimizing the financial privileges required to embody this specific class ideal. For scholars like Rottenberg, neoliberal feminism is, indeed, worth investigating for how it implements what McRobbie has argued as the “disarticulation” of feminism, as these new questions about the gendered capitalist subject have presented neoliberal feminism as “a key contemporary discourse ... overshadowing other forms of feminism, rendering it more difficult to pursue a vocabulary of social justice... by promoting individuation and responsabilization.”⁷⁵¹ To this end, recent autobiographical documentaries produced around the diva and pop star take up similar questions about the gendered labor conditions of media industries. The emphasis on these gendered labor conditions invites critical examinations for scholars about how forms of branding like these documentaries have oriented themselves to the terms of a contemporary feminism that promises feelings of empowerment through an identification with the career highs of celebrity entrepreneurs. Such texts matter particularly as they come to render feminism as specifically oriented around upper-class women’s visibility, a discourse that centers forms of high-paid labor like that of the above-the-line actress-singer-performer while rendering the plight of working class women, such as those responsible for the production of super stardom in careers as hair, makeup, and other types of administrative support, as invisible. In doing so, autobiographic diva documentaries provide vital sites of discourse in how contemporary feminism has been appropriated and made available for the sentimentalization of specific class hierarchies within the U.S.

Representative examples of postfeminist and neoliberal feminist media, music documentaries of the past decade have responded to the cultural and economic crises of the Great Recession by placing new demands on the legitimacy of celebrity success. In *Gendering the*

⁷⁵¹ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 21.

Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker re-examine the conditions of postfeminist culture in popular media within the context of the Great Recession, a moment that featured the semi-collapse of the global financial system in 2007 and 2008 that marked much of the economic recovery overseen by President Barack Obama.⁷⁵² Negra and Tasker's work seeks to clarify to what extent conceptual and theoretical accounts of gender under the aegis of postfeminist gender theory were still applicable during this period of financial turmoil, particularly over the tendency of postfeminist culture to celebrate affluent femininities within the conditions of economic optimism and material prosperity.⁷⁵³ "Media culture involves hegemonic processes of sense making," Negra and Tasker observe, "stitching together at times contradictory modes of conventional wisdom, media formats from financial journalism to reality television offer an understanding of the operations of power."⁷⁵⁴ The material culture of the recession, in their estimation, intervened critically in postfeminism as a method of representing the upscale female consumer whose self-production through gendered media commodities can be said to deflect attention from low-paid workers whose labor on the female image is essential to gender as a visible mode of being like the pop star's sartorial excess via magazine covers and stadium shows. Produced within the context of a two-tiered economic recovery, the documentaries of this chapter's study mute forms of class critique by depicting the diva as a retrospectively-but-nonetheless-precarious subject in her pursuit of an artistic career. In *Part of Me*, Katy Perry's career is narrated in terms of her breakthrough and her self-endurance to withstand the travails of media stardom. In *Gaga: Five Foot Two*, Lady Gaga's career is represented in terms of a comeback narrative, as the performer labors to release her album *Joanne* (2016) following the disastrous public relations

⁷⁵² Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

campaign that was *ARTPOP* (2013). These types of narratives are common as they work to re-situate artists at their career heights within new temporalities of fame, often referring to their former precarity and the requisite labor of breaking into the industry. In doing so, these pop star documentaries demonstrate the ways in which, as Negra and Tasker both ask, how recession-era media texts “naturalize gender inequality,” for their focus on economically empowered women’s self-determination at the expense of interrogating collective conditions of women’s labor, “at a moment when a range of social inequalities threaten to rise to the surface.”⁷⁵⁵

In certain ways, branded celebrity media, particularly of pop stars, takes up the economic rationality of neoliberalism in its emphases on the personal narratives and journeys to entrepreneurial success, taking pains to represent the pop star as herself a gendered entrepreneurial laborer in the media industries. Deflecting critiques about the inherent class disparities between the diva and her audience, these documentaries position the diva within the same forms of economic reality and personal responsibility for success as those in her audience. This circumstance reflects what Catherine Rottenberg has viewed as the compatibility of feminist themes within neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas, reflecting how neoliberal feminism employs the “choice philosophy” inherent to third-wave feminism and its new unprecedented status with high-powered women who have embraced feminist identities publicly.⁷⁵⁶ Within this setting, Rottenberg locates how such feminism employs forms of historiography to mark these perceptions of feminism. “Since the 1970s, a certain liberal feminist narrative of women’s progress has emerged and been accepted in the United States, particularly within the mainstream media,” Rottenberg writes, “It unfolds in the following manner: middle- and upper-class women were confined to the private sphere until first-wave feminism’s

⁷⁵⁵ Negra and Tasker, *Gendering the Recession*, 3.

⁷⁵⁶ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 13.

mobilization in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when women began, en masse, to demand recognition as public subjects.”⁷⁵⁷ The ensuing decades saw renewed opportunities for women’s participation in the public sphere via suffrage, wartime labor, the sexual revolution, the reformation of family and workplace law; all events that, despite the variety and complexity of backlashes to feminism described by Susan Faludi and Angela McRobbie, have come to paint the image of feminism’s ends largely having been achieved due to the disappearance of a number of pivotal and key legal restrictions on women economic self-determination.⁷⁵⁸ Such historical narratives, as Rottenberg acknowledges, paint the picture of a triumphant feminist movement for largely middle-class white women whose new legal protections over the past half-century have found them navigating their professions, occupations, and business ventures with a similar rapacity as their male upper class counterparts. This narrative, unsurprisingly, minimizes the continued saliences of legal battles over women’s rights and economic opportunity, particularly in a period where the constitutional precedent set by *Roe v. Wade* (1973) remains a key site of conservative and liberal feminist activism, as well as the continued health and economic disparities for women of color around wages, maternal mortality, or unequal access to economic or social capital.

Examining media produced in the post-recession context, one concludes that there is a greater availability of media that visualizes forms of feminist rhetoric with yet little interrogation of the structural forms in which gender is produced across, through, and against issues of race, class, and sexuality. Thus, the production of biographic music documentaries within the post-recession context requires an intersectional analysis about how new modes of gender subjectivity in the media industries martial distinct representations of feminism for the purposes of

⁷⁵⁷ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 8.

⁷⁵⁸ See: Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (London, UK: Vintage Books, 1992); Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004): 255-264.

commodification by demonstrating the very neoliberal logic of economic rationality and self-determination that have become hallmarks of popular feminism. These conditions point to the challenges of visibility politics in realizing activist visions of social change, even while they enhance a vernacular of social justice. In “Media, Markets, Gender: Economies of Visibility in a Neoliberal Moment,” Sarah Banet-Weiser further marks this shift between “the politics of visibility” to “economies of visibility.”⁷⁵⁹ While the politics of visibility “usually describes the process of making visible a political category (such as gender or race) that is and has been historically marginalized in the media, law, policy, etc.,” it tends to signify how representation takes on a political valence in ways that configure visibility as political change.⁷⁶⁰ In contrast, “economies of visibility” refers to the ways in which a politics of visibility has become divorced from the actual work of politics:

...economies of visibility fundamentally transform politics of visibility... Race and gender, as visibilities, are then self-sufficient, absorbent, and are therefore enough on their own. Economies of visibility do not describe a political process ... the visibility of identities becomes an end in itself, rather than a route to politics.⁷⁶¹

Marking this shift, Banet-Weiser draws on Robyn Wiegman’s work in *American Anatomies* wherein Wiegman links these economies of visibility to the proliferation of cinema, television, and digital videos in which the body in its capacity as a social identity came to function as its own type of commodity.⁷⁶² Within these economies of visibility, Banet-Weiser argues that the feminine

⁷⁵⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Keynote Address: Media, Markets, Gender: Economies of Visibility in a Neoliberal Moment,” *The Communication Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015): 55.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 55.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid*, 55.

⁷⁶² In *American Anatomies*, Robyn Wiegman examines the development and function of racial and gender identities in U.S. culture, taking care to understand how race and gender identities are themselves understood through the epistemology of the visual. While Wiegman links this economy of visibility, in part, to the proliferation of cinema, television, and video within the post-Civil Rights era as a method of representing bodies as commodities, Banet-Weiser extends this analysis to think about how economies of media validate forms of popular feminism and

body's value is derived, valued, and judged in a way that the body comes to function as a *brand*.⁷⁶³ Through this point, Banet-Weiser's work addresses the ways in which constitutive conditions of women's representation in alignment with the body have continued even in the face of serious and critical gains of liberal feminism culturally. Here, the commodification of the body retains a key function within contemporary strategies of branding via digital media production, where the female body is ascribed *cultural* value as a brand.

Moreover, recent work on the feminist and misogynistic dimensions of media have reminded scholars about the ways in which these elements take up visibility politics as the commodification of identity. Working in this tradition, Sarah Banet-Weiser has studied how metaphors and rhetorics of visibility naturalize various assumptions about the body. In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser further discusses this visibility of popular feminism as it relates to its positioning within brand culture.⁷⁶⁴ Banet-Weiser provides an important understanding of popular feminism as a continuum, "where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured."⁷⁶⁵ Banet-Weiser observes that "the product in gendered economies of visibility is the body (most often the bodies of heteronormative cis-gendered women). Its value is constantly deliberated over, surveilled, evaluated, judged, and scrutinized through media discourses, law, and policy."⁷⁶⁶ Moreover, this focus on the branding of feminism as visible via personalities and cultural products illustrates how "visibility thus yields different gazes, or forms

misogyny through this rhetoric of visibility. See: Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁷⁶³ Banet-Weiser, "Media, Markets, Gender," 57.

⁷⁶⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

of surveillance, based on race and class. This constant surveillance, in turn, encourages girls' and women's participation in the circuits of media visibility.⁷⁶⁷ While acknowledging that visibility can be its own form of empowerment, such emphases are critiqued within the recognition of how such visibility regimes work to discipline a gendered production of the self that is made contingent to neoliberal rhetoric about self-rationality and optimization, thus pointing to the ways in which popular feminism as constitutive of a brand logic for celebrity entrepreneurs also works to re-situate their bodies within the systems of surveillance that make such empowerment attractive in its own right. Moreover, for this reason, the issues of visibility within these documentaries, particularly as they work to manage the conditions of visibility for the celebrity entrepreneur, can be said to highlight how the pop star's emphasis on herself as a laboring body subjects the star's performance of the celebrity persona to the conditions of neoliberal rationality. For this reason, the celebrity entrepreneur *represents* an embodied signifier of the cultural values within that economic system. For this reason, the music documentaries explored within this chapter are crucial sites for understanding the various forms of gendered subjectivities and cultural citizenship that mark the continuing postfeminist dimensions of popular culture and the rise of neoliberal feminism.

In this chapter, I interrogate this notion of the economies of visibility to understand how popular stars seize upon their visibility as the commodity of their labor. Thus, recent music documentaries by pop stars have worked to retain a certain capacity of the body as the site of semi-political brand semiotics. Similar to Banet-Weiser's interest in popular feminism, I take up and center how these economies of visibility work to re-entrench specific forms of class privilege by positioning the diva in terms of the visibility of her labor; a positioning that seeks, in its own ways, to center such entrepreneurial labor within larger gendered conditions in the music and cultural

⁷⁶⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 28.

industries. This chapter, moreover, examines how celebrity personae rendered themselves as visible within the specific and unique historical conditions of the 2010s, a period marked by its own contentious form of class tensions due to a two-tiered economic recovery from the Great Recession and its manifestation as the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 and 2012. In this analysis, I argue these documentaries should be understood for the ways in which they manage these conditions of visibility and reproduce specific class, race, and gender ideologies about the subject of modern feminism as an increasingly neoliberal site of subjectivity.

The Roots of the Biographic Documentary:

Set against the economic recession and changing forms of gender politics, the biographic music documentary relies on key tropes about the pop star diva as a laboring and gendered subject within the media industry. Lead female performers are shown taking on the hard position of being a leader in the workplace (*Gaga: Five Foot Two* (2017); *Life Is But a Dream* (2013)), struggling under the conditions of gendered perception, particularly around attitudes about female entitlement and power in the music industry (*My Time Now* (2011)), and the necessity of being a hard-working woman despite any structural barriers in one's way (*Part of Me* (2012); *Miss Americana* (2020)). In these films, these celebrities are positioned in terms of their labor in the media industry in juxtaposition with elements about their personal history and biography that often work to sentimentalize the endurance of their labor and their own self-vision before their big break or comeback moment. Within this tradition, this intermixing of public and private elements of intimacy work to dramatize these conditions of visibility in the media industry, branding ideas of their authenticity in terms of hard work and the pressures of public scrutiny that bear on one's image. These themes are evocative of key motifs found in the conditions of popular feminisms in

the 2010s. “Neoliberal feminist discourse has produced a new form of neoliberal governmentality for young middle-class women,” Catherine Rottenberg argues in her book, “one that is based not on the management of future risks, but rather on the promise of future individual *fulfillment*, or, more accurately, one based on careful sequencing and smart self-investments in the present to ensure enhanced returns in the future.”⁷⁶⁸ To this point, the sentimentalization of celebrity biography as a narrative of labor struggle – through the difficult histories of “breaking into the industry” – re-centers the pop-star body, constructed through narratives of endurance and hard work, within literary traditions of middle-class narratives about self-sacrifice in efforts to build for the future. In doing so, such documentaries illustrate the centrality of the pop star within a material archive of not only post-feminist rhetoric but the literary archives of neoliberal feminism, a dynamic worth investigating precisely as it works to narrow the imagination of feminist social justice in its affecting presentation of the legitimacy of upper-class women’s privilege as laboring bodies.

These biographic documentary texts draw on a long history in the production of music celebrity, particularly through the development of direct cinema within the context of rock and folk music in the 1960s. As Brian Winston has observed, “direct cinema made the rock performance/tour movie into the most popular and commercially viable documentary form thus far,” a commercial viability that has persisted into the present day.⁷⁶⁹ Promising both authenticity and realism through its purported rejection of formal documentary aesthetics, direct cinema and its fly-on-the-wall style appeared within a historical moment wherein the nation’s youth had begun to turn on the conformist sensibilities of the 1950s. Appearing to reject the hard-sale tactics of

⁷⁶⁸ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, 83.

⁷⁶⁹ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1995), 205.

promotional media on television like *American Bandstand* and talk-show circuits like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, non-fiction texts from the Maysles Brothers as *What's Happening!: The Beatles in the U.S.A.* (1964) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), as well as D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967), promised a documentary form "free" of aesthetic manipulation – eschewing filmmaker intervention and the documentary subject's direct address of the camera in order to provide more intimate and 'real' forms of truth for its audience.

At the same time, these documentaries illustrate the use of direct cinema as a strategy for the development of music personae. Thomas Cohen, in surveying the literature on direct cinema, has found that scholars of the rockumentary and direct cinema have paradoxically asserted that these films often present the 'truth' of their music subjects as best represented in the area of the backstage rather than onstage.⁷⁷⁰ Resisting this temptation, Cohen's work seeks to push scholars beyond the paradigms developed by direct cinema in which the audience is promised the search for celebrity authenticity beyond the curtain of their public image. In doing so, Cohen directs our attention to the ways in which the public stage and behind-the-scenes are themselves mutually constitutive of the ways in which musicians *perform* for their audiences despite the epistemological boundaries typically constructed around these performance stages.⁷⁷¹ Acknowledging this situation goes a long way in understanding the modes and methods of performance found within the development of the music documentary as it pushes beyond its roots in direct cinema within its American context, centering behind-the-scenes content as new venues for the branding of musicians and the performance of their labor within the media industry. Such branding logic can be observed further with the advent of cable television channels where shows like MTV's *Making*

⁷⁷⁰ Thomas Cohen, *Playing to the Camera: Musicians and Musical Performance in Documentary Cinema* (London, UK and New York, NY: Columbia University Press/Wallflower Press, 2012), 54.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid*, 55.

the Video (1999-2009) and VH1's *Behind the Music* (1997-2014) offered platforms for re-contextualizing the public image and therefore performance strategies of popular music artists.

Modern variants of the music documentary, particularly as it is used for the branding of the pop star diva, draws on the branding legacies of direct cinema's search for authenticity by piercing behind the curtain of the public persona, while adding the employment of cinema vérité methods. Whereas direct cinema prized itself on the non-intervention of the filmmaker in the documentary image, cinema vérité, a related but distinct style from French traditions of documentary developed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, reflected a belief in cinematic production as capable of yielding its own forms of epistemological discovery by interrogating the relationship of the documentary subject and their performative capacities in being witnessed by the camera. Within this aesthetic regime, cinema vérité tends to privilege the documentary subject and their own testimony, reflecting the understanding that this act of performative self-display was illustrative of the subject's engagement with their society's value system. To this point, more modern studies of cinema vérité, in particular, frequently mute its relationship to the conditions of postwar France, as a sociological documentary movement positioned adjacently to the cinematic *la nouvelle vague*, a term employed by *L'Express* editor Françoise Giroud to describe the generational conditions and new forms of youth culture within that historical moment. In the most famous cinema vérité text, *Chronique d'un été* (1960), many French subjects were asked about their own happiness within a moment wherein the French youth came to terms with the labor conditions of the post-war period, historical trauma of the Second World War, and the continuing moral difficulties of French colonialism. Within this documentary, these subjects, in their direct address to the camera and in conversation with the filmmakers, manifested issues of self-performativity and processes of thinking through their own position within systems of war and colonialism. The self-performativity

of subjects, as it comes about in the biographic documentary are key to understanding the ways in which performers make themselves legible and known within ideological systems like gender. While the postwar conditions of France that yielded cinema verité may appear far afield than the historical period analyzed here, the comparison is constructive for how it puts into relief the shifting economic and cultural conditions through which these pop stars make themselves legible. And moreover, there are fitting parallels between the disillusionment of French youth in the 1950s in a period of great economic anxiety and fatigue over global wars following rapid media and technological expansions, as the United States of the early 2010s with its declining economic prospects for young Americans and fatigue over the aftereffects of the Bush administration's War on Terror.

Drawing on this documentary legacy, contemporary celebrity in a convergent media production environment has found television documentary an attractive tool for the promotion of music stars. From the 2000s, examples of this phenomenon can be observed in promotional reality shows on MTV like *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* (2003-2005), *The Ashlee Simpson Show* (2004-2005), and *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic* (2005). Other reality tv series as *The Real Housewives* franchise has found a number of their reality actors launching their own brands and music careers, as Bethenny Frankel launched the lifestyle brand Skinnygirl Margarita and "Countess" Luann de Lesseps released several songs like "Money Can't Buy You Class" (2010), "Chic C'est La Vie" (2011), and "Feelin Jovani" (2019) by using promotion from the television series. The overlap between *The Real Housewives* and the diva's brand, perhaps, can be observed in the casting of several housewives like Lisa Vanderpump & Kyle Richards and executive producer Andy Cohen in Lady Gaga's music video for "G.U.Y" (2014) filmed at Hearst Castle.

Moreover, reality TV as a genre built on the logic of producing one's celebrity, particularly for female stars, has been an identifiable grammar since the mid-aughts. Bravo's *My Life on the D-List* (2005-2010) featured the labor of comedienne Kathy Griffin to keep atop her "D-List" perch in the entertainment industry, documenting her work touring and self-promotional brand building. Another example of this identifiable grammar of gendered reality tv stars, perhaps, is Lisa Kudrow's mockumentary *The Comeback* (2005; 2014) in which former it-girl Valerie Cherish, of the fictionalized series *I'm It!*, documents her comeback to television in a new network sitcom that serves as a lead-in to her own reality tv. Through these examples, the representation of women's labor in a convergent media environment is both implicitly and explicitly the thematic material of a number of reality tv series of this period, while illustrating, for scholarly purposes, the entanglements between systems of promotion, labor, and media visibility.

Moreover, the use of reality TV as a branding platform, thus, can easily be understood as situated within gendered discourses of self-governmentality that are central to neoliberalism. Laurie Ouellette has argued that reality programming from makeover programs like *What Not to Wear* (2003-2013) to competition series like *Survivor* (2000-Present) or court shows like *Judge Judy* (1996-Present) "construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility."⁷⁷² Anna McCarthy has extended this analysis further to think about the construction of class affect within reality TV by drawing out how its narratives thematize "the failure of self-management and self-correction, and it calls our attention to the inadequacies of the

⁷⁷² Laurie Ouellette, "Take Responsibility for Yourself": *Judge Judy* and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 224.

liberal state's contradictory guarantee of both welfare and sovereignty to its citizens."⁷⁷³ Brenda Weber has studied these class dimensions of reality tv through the metaphors of gender that they raise particularly through her focus on how reality TV's discourses are tied to "broader constitutions of democratic citizenship predicated on meritocratic mobility within free markets and societies"; arguing that through such conventions as the makeover, the genre participates in "the neoliberal mandate for care of the self in service of the market fuses with values of a mythic egalitarian America."⁷⁷⁴ Further, Weber characterizes how this neoliberal mandate positions:

The subject as an entrepreneur of the self, who does and, indeed, must engage in care of the body and its symbolic referents in order to be competitive within a global marketplace. In neoliberalism, the subject performs such maintenance of the self ostensibly as a free agent with the state exempted from social welfare responsibilities.⁷⁷⁵

This situation is recalled in biographic music documentaries as the diva labors as a literal entrepreneur of her "self" within a global media marketplace, putting into dialogue various ideologies about the experience of women in the media industry by taking up these experiences of sexist media coverage and incorporating them within the documentary text of the diva's brand.

In fact, the influence and genre of reality TV offers a clear portrait into these circumstances of neoliberalism in which the aesthetic of the self through first-person self-disclosure also works to produce an understanding of the self as an object of labor for the purposes of branding. In her study of reality TV, Heather Hendershot has examined contest-based reality shows like *Project Runway* and observed how a judge's criticism following an episode's challenge functions "like a

⁷⁷³ Anna McCarthy, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," *Social Text* 93, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2007): 25.

⁷⁷⁴ Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2009), 38.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

boss doing an “annual review,” assessing an employee’s strengths and weaknesses and then deciding whether to grant a worker a promotion or to show him or her the door.”⁷⁷⁶ When viewed in light of the comparably large game prizes for competing in reality television shows, as well as promises of a future career potential. “The situation of the worker-contestant on reality television,” Hendershot continues, “closely mirrors that of the worker in today’s neoliberal “talent-led economy.””⁷⁷⁷ This mirroring takes place particularly at the level of financially empowered television production firms recruit and contract labor with less-experienced media professionals working for fees below contracted rates for scripted content in the hopes of being given new visibility and promotion on a show. This visibility comes to function as a form of future value potential, as amateur personalities are given opportunities to build an audience from the television show’s established platform. In this way, Hendershot concludes: “if reality shows offer up a striking (and often painfully Darwinian) picture of labor in contemporary America, it is, to state the obvious, a carefully fabricated representation of labor.”⁷⁷⁸ Thus, talking heads, as forms of self-disclosure, come to illustrate the labor of self-performance as a conduit for building one’s brand through narratives that present the contestant as the object of sympathy or cultural legitimacy. One form of building up one’s brand as the object of discourse has been to lean into performative aspects of embodying the illusion of the American Dream, by highlighting one’s own capacity to work hard and take on issues of personal responsibility and flexibility in order to meet the challenges of the competition through self-mastery.

⁷⁷⁶ Heather Hendershot, “Belabored Reality: Making It Work on *The Simple Life* and *Project Runway*,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 246.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid.

Within this landscape, the watching of reality TV very much functions as a form of investment in the revelation of celebrity and new talent in ways that brand contestants through intimate pieces of biography, thus managing the impressions of the audience at home. To this point, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-Present), *Project Runway* (2004-Present), and *American Idol* (2002-2016; 2018-Present) all offer ways in which new talent was scouted through television production, particularly as in the first and last cases the search for the next drag superstar and new American idols functioned as launching pads for new music personalities. Unsurprisingly, these shows have featured appearances from the types of divas examined within this dissertation. On *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Lady Gaga, Christina Aguilera, Shania Twain, Miley Cyrus, Janet Jackson, and Nicki Minaj have all appeared at various points on its various seasons. On *American Idol*, Katy Perry has served as one of the lead judges since its reboot in 2018. Throughout the original run of the series, Mariah Carey, Nicki Minaj, and Jennifer Lopez all served as judges at various points, while performers like Lady Gaga and Beyoncé were featured in different capacities as guest performers. As these divas have been anchored as the meritocratic ideals of creative labor within this sub-genre of reality TV, these stars have re-situated their own branding media to take on these narratives of meritocratic striving, thus pointing to the ways in which such celebrity is constituted within neoliberal discourse as the fruits of one's labor and the enduring strength of a subject to master the conditions of visibility in the cultural marketplace.

Gendered Visibility and Labor in the Diva's Biographic Documentary:

Feminist media historians have routinely taken up the issue of visibility and invisibility of labor as a central binary in writing the history of women in media industries. In her introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Media Histories* entitled "Labor," Denise McKenna argues:

For media scholars, examining labor practices is key to understanding how structural limitations within media production have been constituted and replicated. For feminist historians, this project is often complicated by having to make women's work visible as labor, which is not simply a question of historical neglect: it is a cultural legacy and a material present.⁷⁷⁹

Hollywood film production has been the typical site of investigation for media scholars, thus pointing to the needs of further media analysis in other domains of cultural production. Emily Carman, writing in *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System*, studied archival records from studio contracts and legal documents, industry trades, newspapers, and fan magazines to re-center the agency of film actresses like Clara Bow, Claudette Colbert, and Barbara Stanwyck within the classical Hollywood studio system. Carman foregrounds their agency by looking at how these women managed the risk of working freelance within independent production by seeking out other prestigious, independent producers as David O. Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn among others. Her analysis seeks to challenge the absence of these women as central players within pre-World War II Hollywood and therefore centering laborers who challenged the gender hierarchies of the film industry.⁷⁸⁰ Elsewhere, Erin Hill has developed her own labor history of women's work in *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* that has challenged key myths of Hollywood history:

...reflected in both its cultural works and its own internal production culture – that women did not participate in much of film history except as actors or, more rarely, as screenwriters

⁷⁷⁹ Denise McKenna, "Editor's Introduction: Labor," *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2018): 2.

⁷⁸⁰ Emily Carman, *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016).

because they were pushed out from behind the camera in the early years of filmmaking, managing to return decades later only amid nationwide equal rights activism.⁷⁸¹

Hill's work has challenged this myth by quite literally re-framing the concept of female labor within feminist media histories by shifting from the locus of above-the-line labor like actresses and screenwriters who managed to survive in the studio system to look at the forms of labor rendered invisible through virtue of being behind the camera, from costume designers and other production designers to secretaries and script readers. Hill's work continues within dominant traditions of gender studies that stress the conditions of visibility for women's labor by taking into view the class politics that inherently structure the cultural industry's ability to recognize such forms of labor as having real economic value.

The biographic diva documentary remains a significant site of investigation about the representation of female performers as constituted around a discourse of visibility within the cultural industries. Previous chapters have written to this effect about the ways in which female performers have taken up various forms of cultural production for the management of their own conditions of visibility and to enhance their own economic power within media industries. In the ensuing cultural production, a variety of biographic media texts work to narrate the discourses of gendered visibility within the context of everyday forms of cultural surveillance of women and their bodies. Thus, within the space of these documentaries, celebrity documentarians have sought to render a more intimate version of these women as more visible and more legible to its audience, often by drawing allusion to the various ways in which women's bodies are disciplined according to gender ideals like beauty or respectability politics. This thematic material often reproduces what Ilya Parkins and Eva C. Karpinski have recognized as a central trope in Western feminist thinking:

⁷⁸¹ Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ and London, UK: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

“In/visibility ... as a shifting signifier of feminist desire for presence.”⁷⁸² Through documentary strategies that privilege the female voice, self-disclosure, and subjectivity, these recent biographic documentaries have implicitly drawn from this rhetoric of visibility, particularly as they seek to understand the gendered pressures of female celebrity and the requisite labor necessary to succeed in a masculinized music industry. In doing so, such documentaries can be said to manage the conditions of new media feminisms as an identifiably elite-driven discourse within the United States today, as branding strategies work to center the diva as a representative image of women’s presence and power within media industry.

Through these commitments, the new branding vehicle that is the biographic documentary illustrates its relationship to longstanding discourses about women’s labor within the context of feminist motifs. In “I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here: Adultery Boredom, and the “Working Girl” in Twenty-First Century American Cinema,” Suzanne Leonard argues that “postfeminist culture borrows from a feminist-positive legacy of work but reconfigures the ideological underpinnings of this discussion.”⁷⁸³ This legacy includes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s advocacy of women working outside of the home as central to women’s independence in *Women and Economics* (1898), as well as Betty Friedan’s interest in the feminine mystique – that problem without a name – to refer to a system of cultural values that invested in women’s fulfillment through domestic work in the postwar moment. In many senses, the depiction of the “working girl” on prime-time TV throughout the 1960s and 1970s in shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) was co-linked with representations of single women whose pursuit of careers seemed

⁷⁸² Ilya Parkins and Eva C. Karpinski, “Introduction: In/Visibility in/of Feminist Theory,” *Atlantis* Vol. 36, No. 2 (2014): 3.

⁷⁸³ Suzanne Leonard, “I Hate My Job, I hate Everybody Here: Adultery, Boredom, and the “Working Girl” in Twenty-first-century American Cinema,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, 101.

to offer timid to radical interventions into heterosexuality.⁷⁸⁴ These texts, among others, have yielded a cultural archive of working women that Leonard argues:

As a feminist icon, the modern woman worker is, predictably, white and upper or middle class, as were the women whose discourse fomented the working woman as a feminist model in the 1960s and 1970s. Narrating the story of working women only through the construction of such privileged and educated women is problematic, however, for it ignores the long history that working-class women and women of color have had in the labor force. Not coincidentally, postfeminist media culture has also implicitly accepted the white, middle- to upper-class model of the female worker as exemplary.⁷⁸⁵

Reading the use of extramarital affairs in recent cinema, Leonard interrogates the status of adultery narratives in challenging the class assumptions made about working women. Moreover, Leonard's insight here positions our attention into the disparate conditions of visibility for working class and middle to upper-class women. To this point, Leonard argues that representations of gendered labor in recessionary media mirrors masculine economic anxieties of the period and the rise of a cultural archive of works addressed to middle-class women about the growing patriarchy of the workplace like Hannah Rosin's 2010 TED talk "The End of Men" subsequently published as *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (2012). Within these conditions, the visibility of women's labor in the media industries, particularly as it has entered in certain documentary discourses by focusing on pop stars as their subjects, has tended to reflect this divide by masquerading the performance of gendered labor by the pop star while rendering invisible the myriad forms of labor and economic struggle that are central to producing pop stardom.

⁷⁸⁴ See: Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁷⁸⁵ Leonard, "I Hate My Job," 101.

By emphasizing images of gendered labor on the celebrity stage and not the corporate boardrooms, remaining areas of patriarchal authority go under-examined, as these documentaries work to intervene in the patriarchal gaze of media criticism. Such a focus thereby reflects the ways in which central motifs of the gaze, a foundational paradigm for image-based media feminisms, has, in a certain sense, worked to maintain the invisibility of women's labor, particularly at a time when the display of such gendered labor by pop stars has become one way in which in feminist iconography is attached and sentimentalized paratextually through such documentaries. For this reason, Banet-Weiser's direction in referring to these aspects of brand culture through the notion of "economies of visibility" does much to describe the current state of visibility politics and the commodification of cultural politics around the re-signification of the feminist subject under capitalism in this post-recessionary context. In doing so, interrogating this notion of the economies of visibility, as it describes the commodification of the body through branded visibility, helps illustrate the ways in which a new feminist semiotics has worked to elevate the status of upper class women within the hierarchies created by media production. At the same time, these documentaries also render invisible the other forms of feminist cause-making that might be extended to other female laborers who, though responsible for bringing the brand of the pop star to life, receive little to no equity for their work and remain outside the lens of this documentary image.

These issues of labor and visibility, forcefully studied by feminist media scholars, have not typically been treated when discussing the issue of female transmedia stars who have worked within multiple sectors of the media industries. Moreover, this focus matters as it has migrated into the promotional language of the industry itself. Some of the industry's biggest female stars have been re-centered through a variety of marketing paradigms like Billboard's Woman of the

Year that seek to “recognize extraordinary women in the music industry who have made significant contributions to the business and who, through their hard work and continued success, inspire generations of women to take on increasing responsibilities within the field.”⁷⁸⁶ Such award platforms conditioned around the visibility of cultural representation feature these same tensions around contemporary understandings of women’s labor in media production. These understandings contribute to perceptions of commercial industry’s laborious feminist cause-making while allowing clear gender inequities to persist.

In 2018, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative published their results on the broader study of gender and race within the U.S. music industry.⁷⁸⁷ Studying 600 popular songs from 2012 to 2017 of Billboard’s Hot 100 end of year charts, the report concluded that female artists represented approximately 32.5% of all solo acts while only 22.4% of all included artists.⁷⁸⁸ The “volume” of labor was also a concern presented in the report, where the top five male songwriters averaged a number of twenty-one to thirty-six credits, while their female peers averaged a number of eight to fifteen. The songwriters listed in these categories are some of the very females who have been the subject of this study: Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, and Adele.⁷⁸⁹ Through the years examined, female producers reflected about 2%, and to little surprise, female producers from an underrepresented racial and ethnic group accounted for only 2 out of 651 producers, i.e. less than one percent.⁷⁹⁰ To this point, the emphatic visibility of the female performer within biographic documentaries of the past decade, thus highlights central problems

⁷⁸⁶ “McEntire Named Billboard’s Woman of the Year,” *Billboard*, September 17, 2007,

<https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1049244/mcentire-named-billboards-woman-of-the-year>.

⁷⁸⁷ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, “Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters, & Producers Across 600 Popular Songs from 2012 to 2017,” USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, January 2018, 1-31.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

within critical genealogies that center paradigms of visibility and invisibility, precisely because what is visible often works to occlude recognition of the gendered absences in the rest of the music industry. For this reason, these documentaries in how they both visualize and render visible the dimensions of female labor within pop star celebrity requires us to ask complex questions. These questions would interrogate how forms of feminist rhetoric have become visibly potent within contemporary media production, while women, and particularly non-white women, have remained absent from the ranks of above-the-line talent, despite such highly visible representations of celebrity elsewhere.

One reason, perhaps, for this circumstance is the way in which non-self-authored documentaries often take up the subject of the global diva through lenses of female victimhood, in such films as *Amy* (2015) and *Whitney* (2018). The subject of women's visibility and its relationship to gendered labor conditions in the media industries is a central theme in Asif Kapadia's *Amy* (2015), a posthumous documentary edited together with the significant use of paparazzi imagery of the singer. In 2011, Winehouse died of alcohol poisoning nearly five years after her international breakthrough *Back to Black* (2006) with singles "Rehab" (2006) and "You Know I'm No Good" (2006) that earned her no less than five Grammy Awards in 2007, including Best New Artist, Record of the Year, and Song of the Year. Using personal testimonies and archival footage, *Amy* documents Winehouse's tumultuous life in the public eye, assigning culpability to the media conditions for her death as she became a lightning rod of attention in entertainment media and tabloid journalism. Kapadia's editing and selection of footage illustrates the familiar ways in which women's behavior is put under conditions of scrutiny and surveillance in media industries. Edited against the spate of nominations the singer received for the 2007 Grammy Award nominations, Kapadia's selection of footage illustrates the subtle forms of

misogyny that appear anchored to women on the margins of respectability. One example of this misogynistic dynamic includes the archival footage used in *Amy* of George Lopez when he announces her Grammy nomination for The Best Female Pop Vocal Performance Award by cracking the joke: “Can somebody wake her up this afternoon around 6:00 and tell her? Drunk ass.”⁷⁹¹ Here, this moment embodies the type of comments made to create gendered boundaries of behavior for women through dominant middle-class attitudes around self-control and self-discipline. Recognizing these circumstances illustrates how Winehouse’s failure to embody these middle-class ideals of self-restraint came to be read through a lack of empathy for her patterns of addiction and around perceptions of her moral values. In 2008, Winehouse’s manager Raye Cosbert gave voice to the sentiment that the singer’s subjection to a merciless press was a byproduct of her ordinariness:

She’s not like your usual reclusive star. She likes ordinary people. She likes playing pool with the bin men in her local. If she could take the Tube everywhere, she would. She feels deeply uncomfortable in the world of VIP celebrity. It’s unfortunate that you can’t teach somebody how to deal with fame.⁷⁹²

This type of treatment by the press has served for Kirsty Fairclough as a representative trend in late ‘00s media of the ways in which new forms of digital blogging like Perez Hilton and TMZ took advantage of new conditions of media production and distribution on the internet in their spectacularizing of the “downfall” narratives of young female celebrities.⁷⁹³ These names includes figures like Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan who all seemed to presage the new

⁷⁹¹ *Amy*, DVD, Directed by Asif Kapadia (UK/USA: Film4/On the Corner Films, 2015).

⁷⁹² Robert Sandall, “Can Amy Winehouse Be Saved?” *The Sunday Times*, July 27, 2008, entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article4383952.

⁷⁹³ Kirsty Fairclough, “Fame is a Losing Game: Celebrity Gossip, Blogging, Bitch Culture and Postfeminism,” *Genders*, Vol. 48 (2008).

forms of fame in the digital era and its consequent erasure of clearer boundaries between publicity and privacy. To this point, Winehouse's difficulties with drug addiction and her publicly contentious relationship with boyfriend Blake Fielder-Civil were the centerpiece of media narratives about her self-destructive behavior or, in some senses, her failure to embody dominant ideas about female respectability within the conditions of visibility in the media.

Commentary on the documentary has sought to both bolster its claims about the gendered incongruencies in media representations of addiction. Pauwke Berkers and Merel Eeckelaer have compared the representation of Amy Winehouse to Pete Doherty in British journalistic media. Their conclusion found that while Doherty's excessive behavior was sometimes celebrated within the contours of rock-and-roll masculinity, Winehouse's behavior tended to portray her enactment of this type of masculinity as the result of her own moral failing or victimhood.⁷⁹⁴ Situated within this broader understanding of Winehouse's death as a kind of moral allegory about the pressures of fame, *Amy* depicts these tensions of Winehouse's career in its key thematizing of self-responsibility or the media's moral failings to protect celebrity subjects. As Hannah Andrews has observed in her study, Kapadia's stated aim has been to reveal the 'real' Amy, a notion underscored further by the use of the documentary's poster promising to portray "the girl behind the name."⁷⁹⁵ To do this, *Amy* takes pains to underscore her talent as its own particular kind of legitimacy for her fame in the face of the negative attitudes about her drug addiction and self-destructive behavior. These themes are usually achieved through the use of music industry luminaries to legitimize her singular, individual talent rather than presenting a sustained critique about such gendered

⁷⁹⁴ Pauwke Berkers and Merel Eeckelaer, "Rock and Roll or Rock and Fall? Gendered Framing of the Rock and Roll Lifestyles of Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty in British Broadsheets," *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2014): 3-17.

⁷⁹⁵ Hannah Andrews, "From Unwilling Celebrity to Authored Icon: Reading *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015)," *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2017): 353.

language. In her analysis on the narrative of Winehouse's life presented in *Amy*, Bronwyn Polaschek observes:

Winehouse's life is represented in *Amy* as a downward spiral, from the open, talented and intelligent young woman before fame, to a (still) young woman who is desperately trying to cope with the psychological scars of a difficult childhood, a destructive, co-dependent relationship and the 'fame damage' (Redmond 2006, p. 34) caused by constant media intrusion into her life. The narrative is one of steady decline so that, although Kapadia's stated intention is to overturn the trainwreck narrative of Winehouse's life, his film lingers on the same lurid details and media footage used to construct this narrative, such as the widely circulated photographs of Winehouse and Fielder-Civil emerging from a pub scratched and bloodied that were first published in *The Sun* on 24 April 2007.⁷⁹⁶

Polaschek explains that Kapadia recycles this imagery produced by paparazzi sources and Winehouse's personal computer in ways that re-produce the female celebrity's lack of ownership over their conditions of visibility in the media, particularly as it commodifies women's bodies.⁷⁹⁷

This commentary draws our attention to the ways in which the biographic documentary labors over these conditions of visibility without interrogating the systems of media production themselves. Rather than critiquing how media law has provided for a system of media production rooted in forms of gendered surveillance, the documentary re-commits to the ways in which Winehouse's career is a gendered allegory about our media culture not the legal structures that make such forms of hypervisibility and harassment possible. Moreover, in doing so, *Amy*, it can be said, represents Winehouse as implicitly a subject of failed labor, a woman whose apparent

⁷⁹⁶ Bronwyn Polaschek, "The Dissonant Personas of a Female Celebrity: *Amy* and the Public Self of Amy Winehouse," *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2018): 26-27.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

“failures” to self-discipline was amplified by a victimizing press that contributed to her own destructive behavior. At the same time, the documentary also attributes these issues to those around Winehouse for their own mutual failings to help the performer adjust to healthier patterns of behaviors. The ways in which this documentary represents the tragedy of Winehouse’s life – that it is itself represented as a tragedy – illustrates the function of culpability and its related themes of self-governance in neoliberal discourse that works to define singers through the success and failure of their labor. As can be seen in *Amy*, this orientation frequently avoids asking deeper, more probing questions about the media and legal structures themselves that make such tragedies *also* representative of women’s treatment in the press.

Playing upon these dimensions of a masculinized media press to center ideologies of female precarity, one recent biographic documentary that examines the pop star body as an embodiment of women’s labor within the gender hierarchies of the music industry is Chris Moukarbel’s *Gaga: Five Foot Two* (2017). Produced by Live Nation Productions and distributed on Netflix, *Gaga: Five Foot Two* documents the process of recording Lady Gaga’s fifth studio album *Joanne* (2016), the lead-up to her half-time performance at Super Bowl LI, and the pre-production phase for Bradley Cooper’s adaptation of *A Star Is Born* (2018). Employing a cinema-verité style, the documentary promises, in its Netflix synopsis, to give viewers an “unfiltered, behind-the-scenes access as Gaga spends time with close friends and family members.”⁷⁹⁸ Through such rhetoric, the documentary promises to re-mediate the Gaga star image by its centering of behind-the-scenes imagery and the deeply intimate moments of the singer’s coping with the physical pain and partial disability leftover from a significant hip injury during the Born This Way Ball tour that forced her to cancel around twenty-two shows in total, representing about 200,000

⁷⁹⁸ Netflix, “*Gaga: Five Foot Two*,” Netflix Media Center, <https://media.netflix.com/en/only-on-netflix/80196586>.

tickets worth approximately \$25 million in gross ticket sales.⁷⁹⁹ The film starts and ends with the image of Lady Gaga descending from the top of the NRG Stadium in Houston, TX for Pepsi Zero Sugar's sponsored production of the Super Bowl LI halftime show. Immediately preceding this image of Gaga being raised into the air, the audience is brought into her home as she focuses our attention to the current situation of her career, as Warner Brothers has just greenlit the adaptation that would net the singer an Academy Award for the film's song "Shallow" (2018). Gaga is fighting with her then-fiancé Taylor Kinney and requires extensive massages & physical therapy to keep her body in shape for the extreme bodily demands of stardom. In this way, *Gaga: Five Foot Two* interrogates the labor of pop stars in the media industry and examines the intimate truths about their body and its visibility as deeply commodified. In doing so, the documentary works to situate the audience in terms of Gaga's career and the requisite labor it will take to achieve her career comeback despite the thorny circumstances of the reality presented in the film.

While these types of documentary take up the gendered pressures of fame, their narratives often center the female pop star, her visibility, and her labor within media production. Of the narratives sometimes emphasized, documentarians depicting these performers have often attempted to provide enhanced testimony to re-story scandals that mark the pop star's branding within industries of tabloid journalism, illustrating the ways in which the diva labors over her self-perception. Drawing significant parallels to the gendered treatment of working women and media criticism itself, Lady Gaga herself suffered a backlash in her career towards the end of her album *Born This Way* (2011) over negative perceptions of her ambition, the overuse of visual spectacle, and a declining popularity of her music singles on the Billboard charts. Part of this backlash was most focalized when Madonna, in an interview with Cynthia McFadden for ABC's *Nightline*

⁷⁹⁹ Ray Waddell, "Lady Gaga Tour Cancellation: A Look at the Damage," *Billboard*, February 14, 2013, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1539268/lady-gaga-tour-cancellation-a-look-at-the-damage>.

(1980-Present), seemed to openly criticize the singer's homage to her own re-invention of female stardom at the dawn of the video era on MTV. When asked about questions of authenticity amid industry speculation of Gaga's "Born This Way" (2011) plagiarizing Madonna's "Express Yourself" (1989), the singer told McFadden: "It feels reductive... look it up."⁸⁰⁰ This moment seemed to represent another example of the conditions around originality and authenticity that mark tensions around female authorship, as well as the forms of competition women face against each other in media industry. This interview also became a viral moment in itself with ABC News's video clip of it on YouTube reaching approximately two million views as of August 2020. This moment is recalled in *Gaga: Five Foot Two*, particularly through the opportunity for Gaga to control the narrative around this viral moment, providing a significant example of the performer's own self-authoring through this documentary production. While on a cigarette break outside, she voices to one of the musicians from the studio:

When you reference or nod to something in the music, it's just like putting something precious and plastic in a suitcase... that you are going to take into the future. Because I've experienced that with people feeling like I was taking from them, right? I have now learned going – looking back at what they were saying and going, "Oh, my God. No." I was totally, like, honoring. And so, the thing with, like me and Madonna, for example, is that I admired her always, and I still admire her, no matter what she might think of me. ... The only thing that really bothers me about her is that I'm Italian and from New York, you know? So, like if I got a problem with somebody, I'm gonna fucking tell you to your face. But no matter how much respect I have for her as a performer, I could never wrap my head around the fact that she wouldn't look me in the eye and tell me that I was reductive, or whatever.

⁸⁰⁰ "Madonna Says Lady Gaga is 'Reductive'," YouTube Video, 8:01, Posted by "ABC News," January 13, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJuYjtp70jc>.

Like I saw it on fucking TV, telling me that you think I'm a piece of shit through the media is like ... it's like a guy passing me, like, a note through his friend. "My buddy thinks you're hot. Here's his, like--." Fuck you. Like, "Where's your buddy fucking throwing me up against the wall and kissing me?" I just want Madonna to fucking push me up against the wall and kiss me-and tell me I'm a piece of shit.⁸⁰¹

This moment, in the documentary, would spill out into industry trade papers as the form of publicity for the film, representing the next salacious tidbit in the tête-à-tête between the two iconic performers.⁸⁰² Gaga's words, here, also do much to center the discussion of her experience as a subject within media journalism. Positioned against forms of media surveillance that highlight the gendered nature of stardom, the diva emerges here textually – and in other music documentaries – centered around her entrepreneurial labor within a hypermediated cultural environment. Within this context, these documentaries humanize *and* brand these personae by their ability to master the industry's systems of visibility and self-promotion as vehicles for self-expression.

Moreover, this moment of re-authoring the feud with Madonna also points to the ways in which publicity discourse provides avenues for female stars like Lady Gaga to self-author themselves by controlling the media discourse around their celebrity. In such narratives, the audience is not just positioned to the image of the contemporary pop star as the object of voyeurism but as *the* subject whose labor constitutes, in Mark Andrejevic's words, "the work of being watched."⁸⁰³ Here, Andrejevic's work reminds us that media laborers who exploit their privates

⁸⁰¹ *Five Foot Two*, Netflix, Directed by Chris Moukarbel (USA: Live Nation Productions/Mermaid Films, 2017), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80196586>.

⁸⁰² See: Joe Reid, "Lady Gaga Bares All and Claps Back at Madonna in her New Netflix Doc 'Five Foot Two,'" *Decider*, September 9, 2017, <https://decider.com/2017/09/09/gaga-five-foot-two-review>.

⁸⁰³ See: Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

lives into a mediated spectacle do so as a matter of financial return.⁸⁰⁴ Within these music documentaries, the first-person testimonial camera shot is employed as a way of privileging themes of self-disclosure and the laboring of self-perception. Andrejevic's work, written during the first period of reality TV and its mirroring in early forms of social media, sought to critique the democratic impulses of interactive media in the presumption that such interactivity would break down the formal hierarchies inherent to media production. Andrejevic has read this practice of self-disclosure "as a form of self-expression and individuation" that other scholars, as Roland Marchand in *Advertising the American Dream*, have located as the promise of individuation in which self-disclosure operates crucially for the rationalization of forms of mass consumption.⁸⁰⁵⁸⁰⁶ By thinking of such rationalization in these new forms of the diva commodity, the biographic documentary is a representative example of the themes of self-governmentality involved in the diva's management of her brand, as she works to negotiate public criticisms and threats to her cultural and economic value through these practices of self-authoring and self-disclosure.

In *Gaga: Five Foot Two*, other moments recall this intense focus on the pop star subject's visibility. A montage sequence features the infamous catwalks that marked Lady Gaga's emergence into public life. Writers at the turn of the 2010s lauded the singer for the sense of excitement that she brought back into the mainstream of pop celebrity, seeming to spectacularize the banal forms of stardom culled by paparazzi tabloids as an opportunity to generate more publicity with outrageous costumes through the participatory nature of a nascent social media ecosystem. She achieved this feat by working with the archives of various fashion houses to

⁸⁰⁴ Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, 78.

⁸⁰⁵ Mark Andrejevic, "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2002): 237; 239.

⁸⁰⁶ See: Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

heighten her everyday forms of self-promotional fashion branding. In the documentary, this history is brought back to the fore as the audience sees a number of the most ‘iconic’ looks from the earlier period of her career to fans who chant their adoration: “Gaga! Gaga! Gaga!” Moving from archival footage into the present, Lady Gaga puts her feet up on the dashboard of her car as she relaxes into the silence of this new career lull following the number of mishaps that happened on her fourth studio album *ARTPOP*, whose promotional campaign was ended due, in part, to a clear lack of management following the breakdown of her relationship with former-manager, Troy Carter. In previous moments, Gaga comments on the misogyny of this visibility as it relates to the gendered conditions of labor in the music industry:

When producers, unlike Mark [Ronson], start to act like ... “you’d be nothing without me.” For women, especially. It’s those men have so much power...that they can have women in a way that no other men can. Whenever they want, whatever they want, the cocaine, the money, the champagne, the girls, the hottest girls you’ve ever seen. And then, I walk in the room, and it’s like eight times out of ten, I’m put in that category. And they expect from me what those others girls have to offer when that’s just not at all what I have to offer in any way. Like, that’s not why I’m here. I’m not a receptacle for your pain. You know what I mean? I’m not just a place for you to put it. ... The methodology behind what I’ve done is that when they wanted me to be sexy or they wanted me to be pop, I always fucking put some absurd spin on it that made me feel like I was still in control. ... So, you know what? If I’m going to be sexy on the VMAS and sing about the paparazzi, I’m going to do it while I’m bleeding to death and reminding you of what fame did to Marilyn Monroe... The

original Norma Jean. And what it did to Anna Nicole Smith. And what it did to.... Do you know who?⁸⁰⁷

While this moment puts into dialogue several issues covered in the documentary – female exploitation by male producers at a time when Dr. Luke was undergoing much public and legal scrutiny over his working relationships with singers like Kesha, as well as ideas about the visibility politics of self-objectification – Gaga, here, is referring to the fate of Amy Winehouse in particular as an example of what can happen under these gendered conditions of celebrity and media production. In a certain way, Winehouse’s memory, as a figure over whom Gaga personally mourned, lingers throughout the film in this particular way, as a singer who came into fame at the same time as Gaga, had her own issues of addiction and self-destructive behavior, and who communicated a certain kinship about the subtle and more explicit forms of misogyny within tabloid journalism. In making allusion to Winehouse, Gaga – here presented through observational documentary’s promise to provide an unvarnished, more immediate depiction of public figures – speaks to her own subjective experience of the conditions of objectification in the media industry both discursively in terms of its emotional toll and also quite bodily in her relationships with men in the industry.

Offering Gaga a platform through these forms of self-disclosure and testimony, such interactions work to humanize the celebrity subject through senses of victimhood that are themselves treated as authentic, real, and sincere for its audience. It is telling throughout the documentary that no mention of Gaga’s upbringing on the Upper West Side of Manhattan or education at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a school that has featured a myriad of famous alumnae from Caroline Kennedy to Nicky Hilton Rothschild to Edith Bouvier Beale (the first

⁸⁰⁷ *Gaga: Five Foot Two.*

cousin of Jacqueline Onassis depicted in *Grey Gardens* (1975)) contrasts starkly with the more working class upbringing of Winehouse. These distinctions do not come to the fore in Moukarbel's film particularly as they might explain the different lifepaths of two performers whose difficulties with fame parallel each other until their tragic divergence. Moreover, while *Amy* depicted Winehouse as a reclusive artist victimized by the conditions of media visibility in commercial industry, *Gaga: Five Foot Two* presents its artist as a master of this system. Within these moments of sincerity and authenticity about the implicit fear generated by Winehouse's memory, the audience's emotional identification with the singer is engendered through a generalized understanding of women's treatment in the media. This understanding is specifically and distinctly classed in how it takes up the treatment of women by the press and commercial industry – within the context of Gaga's immense wealth – as one way to manage and re-brand public criticism.

Acknowledging my own emotional identification in this moment as a way of softening the language of this critique, it is not so much that these moments are wrong or insincere, it is precisely through their forms of sincerity that such identification with upper-class women's labor in the media industry is made both visible and intimate. This form of visibility centrally emphasizes the subject of the female entrepreneur, while concealing the myriad forms of subordinate labor that work to create not only the documentary itself but the production of the pop star personality, as a number of women within the documentary are not provided their own spotlights but remain rather voiceless within the portrait of Moukarbel's documentary of the Gaga persona, from the masseurs who labor on Gaga's body to her stylists and assistants. I view these moments of giving visibility to the gender politics of stardom as its own form of invisibility, particularly as the gendered subjects who perform the physical and administrative care for the singer are routinely women themselves. Thus, I point to the ways in which this documentary both explicitly and discursively

commodifies the visibility of Gaga's gendered celebrity as a cultural text that makes visible the labor of women in the music industry while organizing the terms of this visibility in front of and behind the camera.

Moreover, the contributions of white and white-passing female performers tend to be over-reflected in this genre of documentary. This circumstance illustrates that despite the gains of Black performers during the MTV era, the development of the transmedia diva maintains a certain hegemonic position of whiteness. In analyzing this genre, it is difficult to avoid examining how its scenes privilege financially empowered women within specific frames of victimhood that disavow a certain recognition of the disparate conditions of agency for these celebrity women as both upper-class and white, i.e. in many senses already empowered subjects. In recognizing this point, I do not mean to suggest that there are no distinct forms of harassment that women – even white women – face in the industry, but that these documentaries often neglect to point out the privileged position of such stars by emphasizing their ability to leverage their star-power for better economic compensation and hire public relations management firms to aid in the process of branding themselves. Against this dynamic, there have been a number of intriguing documentaries about Black divas that have recovered these disparate conditions of agency for women of color performers, such as Sophie Fiennes's *Grace Jones: Bloodlight & Bami* (2017), Kevin Macdonald's *Whitney* (2018), Liz Garbus's *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (2015), and Michael John Warren's *My Time Now* (2010). In these documentaries, as well as the ones produced by Ed Burke about Beyoncé like *Life is But a Dream* (2013) and *Homecoming* (2019), documentary filmmakers engage similar themes about women's visibility and position these stars within the complex image-making apparatus of the media industries with particular emphases to issues of race. In *Bloodlight & Bami*, Fiennes plays with questions of identity and geography in a cinema-verité portrait of the

superstar Grace Jones in her native Jamaica and abroad in New York and Paris, thereby highlighting the continuation of colonialism's performance histories as represented by performers like Josephine Baker. In *My Time Now*, Warren shows the Trinidadian-born Nicki Minaj negotiating the range of perceptions of her professional standards within an industry still caught up in stereotypes about Black women and their assertiveness. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* narrates the history of Nina Simone in her coming to terms with her blackness and African heritage throughout her career, and some of the persisting financial difficulties that can occur for even Black icons like Simone due to their political outspokenness. In significant ways, these films critically explore the terms of Black women's visibility and labor within the music industry, working to present how each of these divas must negotiate not only perceptions of their gender but also perceptions of their race.

Importantly, this negotiation has been re-centered in mainstream branding practices of the diva throughout the past decade. In particular, *Life is But a Dream* and *Homecoming*, which both center the hard-work and creative genius of Beyoncé, are examples of documentaries about Black female superstardom in an industry where such superstardom is represented as hypervisible. Such hypervisibility is used to re-center such labor within the documentary frame as a response to the persistent absence and underrepresentation of non-white women within the music industry. *Life is But A Dream*, produced by Parkwood Entertainment and distributed by HBO, documents the career of Beyoncé Knowles during a year of transition where she parted ways with her father-manager, Matthew Knowles, the birth of her daughter Blue Ivy, and the lead-up to her formal declaration as a feminist. While the singer has been known to be intensely private, *Life* acknowledges new conditions of publicity and its relationship to the privacy and intimacy of the singer. In fact, the singer started producing this footage by hiring a director responsible for visually documenting

most of her life since about 2005.⁸⁰⁸ This aspect of commercial production reflects the sheer amount of visual material and control that pop stars typically have over their own image, reflecting their status as entrepreneurs and caretakers of their own brands and legacies.⁸⁰⁹ In *Life is But a Dream*, the performer reflects on the changed nature of the music industry: “People don’t make albums anymore... They just try to make quick singles.” Her words are juxtaposed against the shot of Destiny’s Child learning that their album, *Survivor* (2001), had gone #1, represented through archival footage from the performer’s vast media library. She continues:

When I first started out, there was no internet. [No] people taking pictures of you and putting your personal life or exploiting your personal life as entertainment. I think people are so brainwashed. You get up in the morning, click on the computer, you see all these pictures, and all you think of is the picture and the image that you see all day every day and you don’t see the human form. And I think when Nina Simone put out music, you loved her voice. That’s what she wanted you to love. That was her instrument, but you didn’t get brainwashed by her day to day life, and what her child was wearing, and who she’s dating and y’know, all the things that really is not your business, y’know? And, it shouldn’t influence the way you listen to the voice and the art, but it does.⁸¹⁰

Retrospectively, this quote appears to put into motion the changes that would result in Beyoncé’s career over the ensuing decade, showing her embrace of the commodification of privacy and her meticulous control over the visibility of her brand. Where the self-titled visual album *Beyoncé* (2013) explored in detail her sexual relationship with her husband within the context of her

⁸⁰⁸ Amy Wallace, “Miss Millennium: Beyoncé,” *GQ*, January 10, 2013, <https://www.gq.com/story/beyonce-cover-story-interview-gq-february-2013>.

⁸⁰⁹ The sheer breadth of the diva’s archive of self-imagery is a recurring aesthetic feature of these biographic documentaries that are produced within the scope of the diva’s self-authoring, as is the case with Katy Perry’s *Part of Me* (2012), Beyoncé’s *Life is But a Dream* (2013), and Taylor Swift’s *Miss Americana* (2020).

⁸¹⁰ *Life is But a Dream*, HBO, Directed by Ed Burke (USA: HBO/Parkwood Entertainment, 2013).

emergent identification as a feminist, the follow-up visual album, *Lemonade* (2016), took up the rumors of her husband mega-producer Jay-Z's extra-marital affair. The resulting album created a visual experience that branded the performer through elements of Black feminism, Black women's agency in cultural production, and the exploitation of privacy through the commodification of her marital strife. Situated within expansive streaming deals, *Lemonade* launched with a distribution deal with HBO and functioned additionally as a publicity asset for her and her husband's recently launched Tidal music streaming subscription, a service that promised to increase Black artist entrepreneurship and compensation. In doing so, this documentary puts into relief the brand considerations and ways in which Beyoncé's exploitation of private and intimate issues – from her politics to marital strife – has found her taking control of her racial and gender identity as a commodity in the marketplace.

While the documentary does much work to point to the directions of a more visibly branded form of blackness in her work, *Life is But a Dream* rehearses familiar biographic documentary genre points about the visibility of women in the media industry. There are several points in the film where Beyoncé's work ethic is positioned centerstage. While preparing to create a live performance for Billboard of "Who Run the World (Girls)," Beyoncé discusses the difficulties of the production schedule, worrying that the first time the number would be seen all the way through was on live television. Despite these circumstances, the singer is seen performing the complex choreography of her Billboard performance in her hotel room's hallway. When we finally see the fully realized performance, it is a visual spectacle and technically brilliant. The audience watches Beyoncé's performing body display the gifts of a technological virtuoso as her body moves in time with not only the sound but the stagecraft of a digital background that features multiple copies of

the performer's body as among the set of background dancers that accompany her. Acknowledging that she was pregnant during the performance, Beyoncé reflects:

Nobody knew that I was pregnant during that performance, and I'm cool with that. I'm not interested in a free ride, but it absolutely proved to me that women have to work much harder to make it in this world. It really pisses me off that women don't get the same opportunities as men or money for that matter cause let's face it money gives men the power to run the show. It gives men the power to define our values and to define what is sexy and what's feminine. And that's bullshit. At the end of the day, it's not about equal rights. It's about how we think. We have to reshape our own perception of how we view ourselves. We have to step up as women and take the lead and reach as high as humanly possible. That's what I'm gonna do. That's my philosophy. And that's what [my single] "Girls" is all about.⁸¹¹

Set against Beyoncé's moving body, her monologue works to situate her performance within latently feminist discourse. While in this moment she appears to leave feminism unstated, these words work to assert a fundamental claim over self-ownership and self-definition, a point that mirrors the singer's earlier point about the new conditions of privacy and publicity and the practices of branding central to contemporary media production. Through these two moments, the documentary mixes the celebrity interview with traditional concert footage in a way that strengthens the perception and intimate bond of the celebrity and her audience through dimensions of neoliberal feminism, reflecting back to the masquerade of Beyoncé's hard work through scenes visualizing her working all hours of the day to produce a high-quality performance. Other elements of these dimensions include the central emphases of self-definition and the belief in her enduring

⁸¹¹ *Life is But a Dream.*

individuality against the fear of diminished expectations over her performance, i.e. what she terms a free ride, pointing to the ways in which physical restrictions like pregnancy are transformed into new barriers for the neoliberal feminist subject to overcome.

The follow-up authorized documentary and concert film about the singer, *Homecoming* (2019), expands on the issues of self-definition and reflects more deeply and visually on blackness within the U.S. context itself. The documentary intermixes Beyoncé's rehearsals and concert for her 2018 Coachella headlining performance, a moment that achieved approximately 43.1 million livestreams on YouTube. As P. Kimberleigh Jordan has analyzed, evoking Beyoncé's grandeur as a Nubian queen, the documentary "sweeps away many previously held tropes of Black female representation and submission on-screen" and illustrates how Black feminist performances, such as this, take up Black female subjectivity as the subject of performance.⁸¹² This performance of such subjectivity works to draw out a vision of this performer within a lineage of African American cultural traditions. Via voiceover, the singer contextualizes her festival set: "When I decided to do Coachella instead of me pulling out my flower crown, it was important that I brought our culture to Coachella." Through title cards, quotations by Black intellectuals and artists as Audre Lorde and Nina Simone are included to frame the various segments of the film. Its artistic reference points are positioned within iconic Black women and authentic racial signifiers through allusions to HBCU cheerleading squads and the styling of her background dancers as Black Panther activists. Beyoncé first explored this authentic and visual style within the context of her single "Formation" (2016) that attracted public scrutiny over the inclusion of these sartorial aesthetics during Beyoncé's guest role at the 2016 Super Bowl Halftime Show.

⁸¹² P. Kimberleigh Jordan, "Performing Black Subjectivity: Enfleshed Feminism in *Homecoming* and *Amazing Grace*," *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2020): 91.

Behind-the-scenes footage of the festival displays the same investment in presenting the pop star body as functionally a laboring one. Introduced by Nina Simone discussing her job of making her Black audience understand their personal history, Beyoncé discusses her original dream of wanting to attend an HBCU, yet confides that when entering the music industry, Destiny's Child, her former music group, became her college. True to this spirit, about a third of the way through the film, a number of marching bands from Southern University to Jackson State University, Alabama A&M University, Grambling State University, Florida A&M University, North Carolina A&T University, Hampton University, Alabama State University are all featured in ways that visualize the spirit of film's embrace and display of African American performance traditions. Against the image of Black musicians practicing, Beyoncé states:

I wanted a Black orchestra. I wanted the steppers, I needed the vocalists. ... and the amount of swag is just limitless. Like, the things that these young people can do with their bodies, and the music they can play, the drumrolls, and the haircuts, and the bodies ... It's just not right. It's just so much damn swag. It's just gorgeous, and it makes me proud. And um, I wanted every person that has ever been dismissed because of the way they look to feel like they were on the stage. Killing 'em. Killing 'em.⁸¹³

Through this monologue, the performer renders herself as intimate with these racially authentic signifiers of African American cultural traditions, suggesting the ways that the performer and her team render such visibility in powerfully authentic and intimate terms. .

Within this embrace of blackness, the documentary works to set-up Beyoncé explicitly as a kind of racial icon, a point demonstrated by the branding value of the film. Recognizing this value does not necessarily dampen its political potential, particularly in *Homecoming's* reclaiming

⁸¹³ *Homecoming*, Netflix, Directed by Beyoncé, Ed Burke (Los Angeles, CA: Parkwood Entertainment, 2019), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013626>.

of cultural traditions within a political context in the United States where necessary Black activism is still met with threats of violence and de-humanization. Nicole Fleetwood, in her study of racial icons, has observed “especially during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, many Black celebrities were active in organized demonstrations and outspoken in their stance against racial injustice and segregation.”⁸¹⁴ Moreover, these celebrities, Fleetwood suggests, practiced their own forms of politics that were rooted in the cultural imagination: “black celebrities used racially infected fashion and visual signs to mark their racial identification and belonging while circulating in broader spheres of U.S. entertainment industries.”⁸¹⁵ Diana Ross, for her part, positioned herself within older legacies of Black music icons as Billie Holiday in her Academy Award nominated performance in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972). It should also be noted that while not always as poignant, Ross’s playing of Holiday also speaks to the strategies of white female stars and divas in their framing themselves through past media icons, as Madonna herself, particularly in the music video for “Material Girl” (1984), frequently seized upon Hollywood icons like Marilyn Monroe in setting up her public image as a superstar. Moreover, the forms of publicity, both informal and more formal, within and outside the documentary also sought to position the performer within historical traditions of Black icons. This aspect, of course, is emphasized by the formal properties of *Homecoming*, as its sequences are cut with quotes from Black icons who have contributed significantly to U.S. culture and our understanding of the African American experience from W.E.B. Du Bois to Toni Morrison.⁸¹⁶ In doing so, *Homecoming* illustrates how the performer’s

⁸¹⁴ Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 72.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid.

⁸¹⁶ Further, executive producer for *The Chi* (2018-2020) Lena Waithe, writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, explicitly centered the performer and her film within the tradition of African American icons: “We’ve seen iconic concert films before. Diana Ross singing in the rain in Central Park. Whitney Houston performing for the troops after they’ve returned home from The Gulf War. But this is different. This concert is seen through the eyes of the performer. And her approach is poetic, breathtaking, exhausting, painstakingly particular, and even though it’s meticulous, she still allows room for there to be rough edges.... Even though the concert is a tribute to Beyoncé’s

documentary team worked to position Beyoncé within longer histories of an iconic Black tradition, while also positioning the performer's career as a medium for these legacies.

Visually spectacular, *Homecoming* brings into discourse not only core attributes about the visibility of women's labor in the music industry, but it also brands African American cultural traditions as visible themselves *through* her artistic work and personhood. These cultural traditions, thus, function as types of signifiers within the self-branding practices of the diva through racial and gendered visibility. Such markers in the documentary illustrate the extent to which the singer's brand has come to inhabit a more public function of educating viewers about the history of the African American cultural tradition, one that is paradoxically marked by its hypervisibility in terms of its influence on modern popular culture and its invisibility in terms of its historical recognition by popular audiences and academic criticism. Beyoncé positions herself as the embodiment of this Black cultural history: "I studied my history. I studied my past and I put every mistake, all of my triumphs, my 22-year career into my two-hour *Homecoming* performance."⁸¹⁷ Such words do much to echo the conditions of self-representation and visibility that were first visited in her documentary *Life is But a Dream*, this time given more shape as an embodied brand and visual experience that speaks to central motifs and themes at the heart of the Trump-era around the nature of race and belonging in American life. Seeking to powerfully intervene in the appreciation of these cultural traditions, *Homecoming*'s

career, it almost seems as if she wants to turn the attention away from herself. Just like Halle Berry knew her being the first African American woman to ever win an Academy Award for lead actress wasn't really about her at all — it was about Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne and Diahann Carroll. Just like I knew being the first African American woman to ever win an Emmy for best outstanding writing in a comedy series wasn't about me either — it was about all the funny women of color that had come before me. I knew they'd been beating on that door for decades, so when I finally came along all I had to do was turn the doorknob." See: Lena Waithe, "Why Beyoncé's 'Homecoming' Isn't 'Just Another Concert Film (Guest Column)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/lena-waithe-why-beyonces-homecoming-isnt-just-concert-film-1232629>.

⁸¹⁷ *Homecoming*.

representation of Beyoncé and her labor as highly visible does much to reposition the relative absence of Black women in positions of power in the music industry as presence through Beyoncé's own visibility. While *Homecoming* does much in terms of its preservation of cultural traditions to outside audiences, there are ways in which the documentary doubles down on practices of branding that, while potent and significant in terms of her taking ownership over her Black identity, have their own tense relationships to the commodification of blackness in the cultural industries; moreover, it offers an example of the ways in which financially empowered individuals are able to territorialize certain social movements by their speaking and appealing to these movements through themselves as kinds of avatars. Through a conscientious documentary approach, Beyoncé's visual work, true to the elements of the biographic documentary, can be said to condition and discipline the reading practices that surround her artistic work by instantiating a pan-black identity within the U.S. context that does not uniquely interrogate the historical conditions of this identity or the existing tensions and fault lines within such an identity. While such aspects are to be sure a high bar for a documentary of this sort, the commodification of blackness in Beyoncé's work does much to illustrate the emerging class tensions of her proprietary relationship to her own racial identity and self-definition as a brand. As Jason King has observed in his study of Black superstardom, "the limits of superstardom show our profound cultural need to distinguish between the marginality of elitism—which cannot be separated from material privilege—and the marginality of disadvantage—which cannot be separated from material lack. In the post-civil rights and postapartheid era, Black superstar productions ... precisely aim to confuse the two forms of marginality through representation and aesthetics."⁸¹⁸

Branded Feminism in *Part of Me* (2012) and *Miss Americana* (2020):

⁸¹⁸ Jason King, "Form and Function: Superstardom and Aesthetics in the Music Videos of Michael and Janet Jackson," *The Velvet Light Trap* 44 (Fall 1999): 88.

In order to evaluate the class politics of the diva's performance of gendered visibility in the media industry, I examine two biographic documentaries, *Part of Me* (2012) and *Miss Americana* (2020), for how they illustrate representative tropes of this genre in terms of their gender and national ideologies. In analyzing the intimate narratives centered around Katy Perry and Taylor Swift and their respective brands in each documentary, this section highlights how *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana* demonstrate crucial aspects of these "economies of visibility" – i.e. what Sarah Banet-Weiser has described as the structure of daily cultural and economic practices in which analytical categories like gender have been commodified and stop functioning as qualifiers to politics.⁸¹⁹ Both documentaries work to make visible Perry and Swift's respective careers as narratives about female empowerment and the embodiment of the American dream, signifying the diva's performing body as fundamentally a laboring and national one in the media industries. As Banet-Weiser argues further, "the product in gendered economies of visibility is the feminine body. Its value is constantly deliberated over, evaluated, judged, and scrutinized through media discourses, law, and policy."⁸²⁰ These films, to quote further, produce "the visible self work to not only serve up bodies as commodities but also create the body and the self as a *brand*."⁸²¹

Examining how these documentaries take up the scrutiny of the female body within the issues of visibility in the media industries, I discuss how these films masquerade the production of a gendered self within, against, and through these conditions of visibility. Locating the representation of these performers and their brands within traditions of American class narratives, I address the ways in which contemporary stars have worked to self-objectify and commodify their bodies as representations and forms of gender politics as crucial narratives to the signification of

⁸¹⁹ Banet-Weiser, "Media, Markets, Gender," 55.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

their stardom and consequent media visibility. In analyzing these moments of self-objectification and commodification of the conditions of women's media visibility, I argue these narratives draw upon the structural conditions of gendered visibility in media industries to situate empathy with a version of feminist affect rooted in an identification with the class position and entrepreneurialism of these stars. This aspect is important to note particularly as female-addressed media over the past decade has sought to promise the vision of female empowerment within the context of an economic recovery that itself augmented the anxieties of precarity in a highly unequal U.S. economy. Both *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana*, thus, can be read as critical texts where forms of feminist ideology in their investment in structural critiques of culture and society are coopted by an individualized attention to a sentimental visibility of these stars as avatars for feminism. This form of visibility is made all the more complex within these documentaries by the structuring absences of women's labor within below-the-line positions in the music industry. Offering an image of women's economic and political empowerment, these documentary texts demonstrate the non-recognition of female working class labor, namely that of those women responsible for producing the diva's superstardom who appear outside of the camera's frame.

As documentaries, *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana* represent meta-critical texts that take up the celebrity of Katy Perry and Taylor Swift's visibility as women subject to cultural criticism in the media. In *Part of Me*, this narrative is positioned through Perry's self-enduring belief in her career and image, despite the demands placed on women entrepreneurs to embody various disparate gender traits to prevent alienating potential audiences. This concept has typically found the non-disclosure of feminist sentiment by highly empowered celebrity women, previously the subject of some lines of postfeminist criticism. Echoing this motif, *Miss Americana* takes up these fears of gendered visibility in more explicitly political terms, as Swift fears the potential of her

career's downslide should she be too politically *vocal*, thereby risking the same fate as The Chicks (f/k/a The Dixie Chicks) following their criticism of President George W. Bush in 2003. In this way, both films take up an intense interest in the management of the diva's gendered visibility by cultural industries, both at the level of each star's first-person disclosures but also through the branding discourses that such documentaries render, as they work to translate celebrity perception into the commodity form of a commercial documentary.

Moreover, this management of perception is achieved specifically in gendered terms, as each star's key challenges, in some regards, is presented in tension with patriarchal authority. *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana* both articulate the challenges of self-expression for women in terms of the artistic and entrepreneurial control exerted by their families and particularly their fathers. When looking at Perry's entrance into pop music and its relationship to an older model of MTV-derived stardom, the explicit sexuality of this performance of gendered celebrity is subject to critique by Perry's religious father in sexual terms. When looking at Swift's decision to speak politically, it is the fear of angering conservative audiences and losing money from touring and other deals that is expressed through tension with her father. Through such encounters, these patriarchs come to stand in symbolically for larger cultural forces around women's empowerment as patriarchal religious authority (Perry), as well as capitalism and cultural conservatism (Swift). Responding to these challenges, both documentaries work to narrate the diva as overcoming the objections of older gender ideologies in their search for self-expression. These narratives of resilience, however, are re-cast in such documentary texts as entrepreneurial success and brand management. Locating these gendered struggles within interpersonal, familial conflict, the diva documentary illustrates the ways in which such structural categories of gender are reduced into the individuated terms of the diva; and moreover, how such individualism is cast within the retrospective temporalities of

these commercial, biographical texts. Such associations illustrate the ways in which broader formations of gender fit within ongoing neoliberal projects that rhetorize narratives of resilience within the marketplace as a celebration of rugged and self-reliant individualism. For this reason, such documentaries offer compelling sites of discourse for understanding the larger class politics shrouded within the metaphors of gender in contemporary American popular culture.

Directed by Jane Lipsitz and Dan Cutforth, Katy Perry's *Part of Me* follows the performer during the closing months of her Teenage Dream World Tour. Released in July 2012, the project was described as part-biopic, part concert film in partnership with MTV Films, Imagine Entertainment, and Perry Productions. Throughout the film, Perry is seen negotiating the demands of stardom, while narrating her self-belief in her career that got her where she was today, as her career's uptick is paralleled with her impending divorce with actor Russel Brand. While the documentary focuses on these moments of PR-approved intimate biography, it begins by putting Perry, her body, and media visibility into focus for her fans. Recordings of young fans, presumably shot on then-available mobile camera technologies, seemed to speak to the new forms of amateur production that marked early social media on Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, these testimonies center the emotional narratives of Perry's stardom but with a particular focus on the feeling of empowerment in her music. One boy, 11-year-old Levi, seeming to suffer with bullying at his school states: "Sometimes when I'm at school people are kind of mean to me, and I listened to her music and it was like a light just lit up in me." Melanie, age 15, speaks to the camera against her Katy Perry fan poster: "We all just want to try and blend in and be normal, but Katy tells us that it's okay to stand out." Razaele explains how Perry's stardom helped her accept herself: "You made me think that being weird is okay." Zachary, age 20, seeming to echo the implicit reference to sexuality that marked Levi's story, continues Razaele's point: "and it's okay to be different and

unique. It's okay to express yourself." A few testimonials later, Brooke reflects: "I have a dream in life, and she had a dream, and she made it happen." Echoing these sentiments, Katy Perry herself is seen on-screen as a teenager confiding: "I don't want to just be like everybody else," thus paralleling the themes of self-distinction, empowerment, and self-acceptance that marked these fan narratives.⁸²² In my previous chapters, I explored how images of audiences themselves function to brand the perception of the audience itself as well as commodify social attitudes towards particularly the LGBTQ community. This point is matched in the testimonies of Levi and Zachary almost implicitly, illustrating the recurring use of the diva as an icon of queer but particularly gay self-acceptance. Within this context, these moments of self-disclosure do much to position aspects of pop celebrity as they crystallize within the biographic documentary as a genre built on the logic of not just self-realization but self-individualization. This logic is reflected in narratives wherein the pop star's emotional journey to her career high or low do much to set the boundaries and terms of her visibility.

While pop stars have come to embody a certain imagination about sexual liberalism in popular culture, *Part of Me* features Perry working through her own religious upbringing and its role in the contentious relationship between her parents and her career. Relying on the use of a laptop camera, the audience sees Perry describing her upbringing hanging out in mainly religious environments and communities. Archival footage of her parents, both Pentecostal ministers, plays as Perry and her family describe the conditions of her childhood, which featured a lot of moving around in pursuit of her parents' careers of faith. While such presence of religious attitudes might raise the specters of traditional gender attitudes, such narratives are counterbalanced through the use of home footage where Perry's father is encouraging her to win the book-reading contest at

⁸²² *Part of Me*, DVD, Directed by Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz (Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2012).

her school. In key scenes, their religiosity is played as a kind of quirkiness that prevented the kids from eating Lucky Charms over its mascot's resemblance to the devil or the prohibition of popular culture like The Smurfs (of which Perry starred in the 2011 film version of the property) and Michael Jackson. It is these religious conditions of her upbringing that starts Perry on her pathway to music stardom. When she was five years old, a Pentecostal revivalist tells her that she is destined to sing. From there, archival footage of Perry singing Christian music onstage plays, as she describes her development as a songwriter that led her to pop music. These scenes, crucially, work to draw on infantilized notions of childhood dreams as anchoring perceptions in the global commodity that is the diva.

Moreover, the documentary teases out cultural narratives of media feminism by its arranging of autobiographical details of Perry's life. In the documentary, the star's musical inclinations shift within the context of her exposure to Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" (1995), a song that has been documented as an example of feminist popular culture that takes up the messiness of female rage as the object of art within a culture that seeks to discipline women's emotions.⁸²³ Moreover, the example of Morissette is made doubly interesting as her album, *Jagged Little Pill* (1995) was produced by Madonna's record label Maverick and is traditionally viewed as the reflection of more explicitly feminist and punk-oriented Riot grrrl within the music industry. Perry's attempts to place herself within this tradition of female/girl power is visualized on-camera as Perry talks with her parents about the potential of being on MTV, a moment that her parents do not appear to treat seriously. The parents close down the conversation by telling Perry, a singer in

⁸²³ In her study of Morissette, Kristen Schilt writes: "Hailed in popular magazines for blending feminism and rock music, Alanis Morissette topped the charts in 1995. Affectionately named the "screach queen" by *Newsweek*, Morissette combined angry, sexually graphic lyrics with catchy pop music (Chang 79). She was quickly followed by Tracy Bonham, Meredith Brooks, and Fiona Apple. Though they differed in musical style, this group of musicians embodied what it meant to be a woman expressing anger through rock music, according to the music press." See: Kristen Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic': The Appropriation and Packing of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music & Society*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2003): 5.

2012 known for her own sexual exuberance in her costuming in such videos as “California Gurls” (2010), that she wouldn’t be performing on the network with half her clothes off. Such comments dramatize the themes of patriarchal control over women’s bodies that was a dynamic feature of Madonna’s branded address through such films as *Desperately Seeking Susan* and the controversies her writhing body generated from both religious and political authorities. As we studied in Chapter Three, the models of gendered performance on MTV, through Madonna’s exceptional status on the network, became code for ideologies of sexual liberalism particularly through the lens of religious objections to media within the arrival of the New Right in the 1980s. Here, this history, both in the politicized female sexual decadence of the 1980s and the later commodification of feminism by popular music in the 1990s, come to implicitly frame Perry’s own stardom, as she struggles with the patriarchal conditions of her upbringing.

Part of Me thus orients the struggle of Perry to overcome her religious roots as the structuring conditions of her bodily self-embrace as a kind of feminist awakening through pop music. While in moments this self-embrace is figured through sexuality, it is also presented through the logic of self-expression. In one moment, Perry confides to the camera: “I feel like I was never allowed to even think for myself. And having any kind of feminist, live-on-your-own independent spirit is just of the devil. And I, like, all of a sudden, my heart wants to do all kinds of things. I want to travel and experience other things outside of my comfort zone. I guess I’m just probably going through a rebel phase.”⁸²⁴ Through this aesthetic register of self-disclosure on the laptop screen, Perry is able to control the narrative conditions of her life in ways that draw out her relatability. She describes how this recognition of her own desires brought her to Los Angeles, where she lives more freely and first met gay people. Her friends are skeptical of this journey,

⁸²⁴ *Part of Me*.

regarding the urban metropolis as a site of fear in a way that recalls the same narrative conditions examined in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. This moment illustrates the longer histories of how MTV stardom re-oriented the relationship between suburban locales and the representation of urban life in commercial media. This theme of women's sexual, urban freedom is now best represented in another work that Susan Seidelman helped produce, namely *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). *Part of Me* re-deploys these cultural narratives that circulated around the diva celebrity advanced by Madonna – i.e. the struggle under religious patriarchalism and the latently feminist journey of sexual expression and economic empowerment in the city. In doing so, feminism, as a media product, becomes located within forms of cultural consumption, thereby also situating Perry's music within this orientation. This point is necessary to center when thinking about the ways that such branded personae help to auger a sense of representativeness in their audiences through the management of cultural visibility performed in such documentary texts. Here, the form of feminism advanced by Perry, backed by the authenticity of sexual liberalism's rejection of patriarchal religious authority, imagines elements of feminism that are individuated around sexual expression, delinked to broader structural issues, and produced through a (sexual) participation within the cultural marketplace as a process of self-objectification *and* self-expression.

Echoing these rhetorical flourishes, Lana Wilson's *Miss Americana* is an intimate look at the career of Taylor Swift through a series of interviews, home videos, behind-the-scenes footage, and concert performances. The documentary itself followed the release of Swift's Netflix concert film *Reputation Stadium Tour* (2018). Its name is taken from one of the tracks on her studio album *Lover* (2019), "Miss Americana and The Heartbreak Prince." One of the centerpieces of the documentary is the singer's decision to endorse Democrat Phil Bredesen against conservative Republican Marsha Blackburn in the 2018 Tennessee Senate Election, a race in which Blackburn

won to become the first female senator from Swift's home state. Other moments highlighted in the documentary are around the singer coming to terms with her own visibility in the media through the inclusion of tabloid tv journalism reported about her. The infamous moment in which Kanye West interrupted her VMA speech to praise the solo efforts of Beyoncé is told through not only the VMA footage itself but its reception in media clips by Jimmy Kimmel and Dr. Phil. Later in the documentary, Swift comes to terms with her own image, not only in the font of criticism over her decision to remain silent over the 2016 presidential election but also by her coming to terms with her body dysmorphia, while she confesses earlier patterns of self-destructive thinking about her body's appearance and relationship to dieting and exercise. Here, this moment, significantly, sees Swift taking on popular criticisms about the destructive elements of celebrity bodies on the self-images of young girls, thereby placing her stardom within contemporary and popular traditions of media feminisms that privilege the protection of young women by sexually exploitative media production as embodied by Tipper Gore's 1980s cultural activism with the PMRC.

Towards the end of the documentary, Swift highlights the disparities of the cultural demands placed on women compared to men in the media industry, discussing the ways in which pop stars are themselves expected to transform and re-brand themselves after every album while such marketing practices are not as foundational to male stardom. Moreover, Swift astutely observes that this cycling through new "eras" of stardom, often at the level of every two years, is one of the ways in which the industry commodifies and discards young female artists. Her words: "We do exist in this society where women in entertainment are discarded in an elephant graveyard by the time they're 35."⁸²⁵ These confessional moments – intimate as they are – point to the ways in

⁸²⁵ *Miss Americana*, Directed by Lana Wilson (Los Angeles, CA: Tremolo Productions, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/title/81028336>.

which Swift's documentary works to contest the conditions of her visibility to the public, seeking to brand and re-brand against negative perceptions of the singer and to appeal to the rhetoric of social justice that has marked not only youth activism but youth consumption, too. In doing so, *Miss Americana* underscores the recent popularity found in ideologies of cultural consumption that stress the female body and female celebrity as a discursive site of feminist politics. At the same time, such documentary texts illustrate the specific aesthetic frames through which celebrity is constructed – i.e. first-person self-disclosures to the camera – that borrow conventions from cinema verité traditions of documentary.

Explaining her endorsement against Blackburn as a recognition of her feminist politics and support for the LGBTQ+ community, *Miss Americana* builds on the common political and cultural associations forged in pop star branding that Swift has used in her career. These dimensions of Swift's branding can be viewed in the marketing of her album *1989* (2014), in which she attributed her new-found respect for feminism to conversations with her friend Lena Dunham. These alleged exchanges led to her publicity-driven marketing of female friendships as a visible foundation of her feminism. This scheme was largely represented in the media through the notion of her "Squad," a collection of young female celebrities like model and TV host Karlie Kloss, model and actress Cara Delevingne, and fellow popstar Selena Gomez who appeared at different concerts on her *1989* World Tour. This inventive use of celebrity friendships and cameos has also been used as a strategy in the marketing/publicity narratives of recent Vegas tours as Lady Gaga's "Enigma" residency (2018-Present). Many of the celebrities associated with her "Squad" would later feature in her music video for "Bad Blood" (2015), remarkable for its use of these female friendships as a way of generating promotional buzz through these celebrity cameos.

The visibility of this political and marketing tactic would be satirized in the SNL skit, “The Squad,” in which two college friends find themselves in a dystopian environment after the singer has taken over the world. Skewering the plausible emptiness of this squad rhetoric, actor Kenan Thompson’s character makes a joke about the elite-driven nature of the squad: “First it was the models, and then the athletes, and then it was everybody. Police, fire department, Matt LeBlanc.”⁸²⁶ Here, the spectacularization of feminism into celebrity promotional partnerships is indicative of larger class formations that drive publicity interactions within the media. At the same time, it also represents the ways in which such promotional media – arising out of a desire for cultural branding or examples of specifically gendered populism through calls for female equality – territorialize social activism by celebrity entrepreneurs. Of course, raising the profile of feminism in popular culture can be a legitimate strategy of cultivating an imagination of social change; yet, it is worth examining and questioning how such imaginations allow for narrower terms of social equality through their centering of political speech in the privileged, not the precarious.

More than this, the idea of the “Squad” as a form of visibility around media coalition-building was a tactic used in Swift’s embrace of her position as an LGBTQ ally. In the marketing for her single “You Need to Calm Down” (2019), Swift built a range of connections to LGBTQ TV influencers from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* stars like RuPaul, Jade Jolie, & Adore Delano, the new *Queer Eye* reboot’s talent like Karamo Brown, Jonathan Van Ness, and Antoni Porowski, as well as other famous LGBTQ celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres and Billy Porter. Hired as the director, YouTube star and former *American Idol* contestant Todrick Hall co-executive produced the video with Swift. Hall himself became a flashpoint in Swift’s publicity narratives about the video, as she came to regret that her politics on LGBTQ issues had not been clearer, following Hall’s question

⁸²⁶ SNL, “The Squad.” *NBC*, Video File, October 3, 2015, <https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/the-squad/2916017>.

posed to her privately about what she would do if her son were gay.⁸²⁷ The resulting music video revels in a mélange of pastel colors, camp aesthetics, and rainbow flags, which see Swift in a mobile trailer park doubling as a kind of utopia for queer performers. Swift, for her part, was not the first pop star to engage in this courting of queer social media influencers. Years earlier, Miley Cyrus also used several drag queens from RuPaul’s series in her hosting of the 2015 MTV Video Music Awards in the first public performance for her *Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz* (2015) album. Swift’s song title is represented within the music video as an explicit caricature of conservative activism. In this way, Swift’s music video for “You Need To Calm Down” employed a number of common images in pro-LGBTQ media that frequently take up the image of religious reactionaries as anti-intellectual (their presence in the music video features a conservative activist holding a sign that says, “Get A Brain, Morans!”).⁸²⁸ Swift, moreover, has been smart about connecting her use of allyship as a marketing scheme within the advancement of activism. The video’s conclusion calls for its audience to support the Equality Act by signing a Change.org petition. Swift echoed this point in her acceptance speech for Video of The Year at the MTV Video Music Awards stating that if the petition gained enough signatures that it would require an official response from the White House.⁸²⁹

Within the context of the documentary, *Miss Americana* works to legitimize Swift’s political voice by grounding her within the virtues of her hard work. The opening use of archival footage follows the development of Swift’s career. Visualizing the singer’s confession of her

⁸²⁷ Brittany Spanos, “Taylor Swift Shares How Todrick Hall Prompted Her LGBTQ Rights Activism,” *Rolling Stone*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-lgbtq-rights-activism-vogue-868637>.

⁸²⁸ Taylor Swift, “You Need to Calm Down,” YouTube Video, 3:31, December 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY&list=LLPId4Tq8Y0Ay9AeZ9zbyIrw&index=310>.

⁸²⁹ The Equality Act is a bill in the United States Congress that seeks to amend the original Civil Rights Act in order to protect legal discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, public accommodations, public education, and federal funding.

desire to be “a good girl,” Wilson illustrates how this goodness draws on the work ethic of the singer. Home footage is shown following Taylor Swift as her younger self performs the National Anthem at a Tennis Tournament. Branding celebrity superstardom as a childhood dream, her everyday girliness is visualized talking on-stage to a crowd about her sense of inspiration from singer LeAnn Rimes and her gratitude upon receiving the gift of a guitar. When pictured at another stage before a performance, Swift’s commentary contextualizes the charm and smile of her younger on-stage self: “I’d been trained to be happy when you get a lot of praise.”⁸³⁰ This aspect of her desire to be the good girl is then situated within the corporate commercial apparatus of the industry, an apparatus that the audience later finds would slow her ability to own her political voice. After her meeting with Sony Music executives, Swift is visualized working at playing and learning the piano, a documentation of the work ethic that is masqueraded throughout the film. Juxtaposed against new stage appearances and the recording of local radio commercials, Swift’s good girl-ness is contextualized and celebrated through this work ethic, following her first single “Tim McGraw” landing on *Billboard*’s music charts in 2006.

In this way, Swift’s goodness is intrinsically tied and presented in the documentary *through* her work ethic as a condition that augments her capacity for making a political claim. Arising out of difficult, intimate conversations with her father and mother, Swift’s decision to make her endorsement public in the Tennessee Senate election is explained as a rejection of the binds of girlhood due to the exigencies of the political present. Lana Wilson’s documentary situates this lesson within the overarching dimensions of Taylor Swift’s persona and moral code as “a need to be thought of as good.”⁸³¹ Swift acknowledges the pressures of being a good girl within this industrial and cultural context:

⁸³⁰ *Miss Americana*.

⁸³¹ *Ibid*.

But a nice girl doesn't force their opinions on people. A nice girl smiles and waves and says thank you. A nice girl doesn't make people feel uncomfortable with her views. [On David Letterman: *It's my right to vote, but it's not my right to tell other people what to do.*] I was so obsessed with not getting into trouble that I was like "I'm just not gonna do anything that anyone could say anything about."⁸³²

Her monologue here gives voice to the idea within feminist politics about the ways in which societal expectations of women around decorous behavior stymies political self-expression. Swift, frustrated at these restrictions on her voice, admits that she began to feel that she had to say something about the contemporary political climate. Against the unstated criticism of her lack of involvement in the election campaign of Hillary Clinton, of which Perry, Gaga, and Beyoncé were notable participants, Swift explains that her hesitancy to get involved in the political arena is due to the example of The Chicks and the off-hand comment made by lead vocalist Natalie Maines.⁸³³ In the documentary, Swift acknowledges the lessons learned from Maines's encounter with conservative backlash, in which the singing group became blacklisted by country radio stations and served as a flashpoint of culture war programming produced on Fox News. She states, "Part of the fabric of being a country artist is not to force your politics onto people," a claim that Nadine Hubbs lends credence to in her study *Red Necks, Queers & Country Music*.⁸³⁴ The singer's rejection of Blackburn as a potential senator hinges around the visibility of Swift's own public image as a representative of the state of Tennessee within national culture. Swift repeats in the documentary Blackburn's vote against the re-authorization of the Violence against Women Act, a piece of

⁸³² *Miss Americana*.

⁸³³ At a 2003 tour stop, Maines criticized President George W. Bush over the decision to invade Iraq by stating that she felt shame that Bush hailed from her native Texas.

⁸³⁴ Nadine Hubbs, *Red Necks, Queers, & Country Music* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

legislation that Swift speaks passionately about its protection of women from date rape, domestic violence, and stalking, as well as the future senator's views on gay marriage. In narrativizing this struggle to come out against Blackburn, *Miss Americana* centers the difficult tensions that middle and upper-class women face when deciding to speak out on behalf of political causes, particularly for its possibility to damage financial relationships due to the ease at which negative perceptions are levied at women.

Moreover, this anxiety over the consequences of her own self-expression connects back to key questions about gendered selves. These fears of voicing one's opinion figures prominently in colloquial narratives of good girlhood as symptomatic of the self-sacrifice expected of women. In fact, the expectation of Swift's political silence is explicitly vocalized in the documentary through her father, Scott Kingsley Swift, who tells his daughter: "For 12 years, we've not gotten involved with politics or religion... Why would you? I mean, does Bob Hope do it? Did Bing Crosby do it?" Echoing this logic, an unidentified man in the room speaks to the commercial stakes of this political engagement: "Imagine if we came to you and said, "Hey, we've got this idea that we could halve the number of people that come to your next tour." The dynamics in the room are distinctly gendered, as Taylor Swift and her mother, Andrea, sit on the couch isolated from the gentlemen in the room trying to make them understand the economic and safety risks involved. These masculine objections, resolutely, draw on elements of conservatism and capitalism that have been uniquely gendered both historically and in the colloquial vernaculars of politics expressed on the internet today. Swift's own remarks emphasize these dynamics: "First of all, these aren't your dad's celebrities, and these aren't your dad's republicans." She forces the men in the room to listen to her political opinion, concluding "I need to be on the right side of history."

As the conviction of her emotion swells, she implores them to recognize the humanity made precarious by Blackburn's politics:

It really is a big deal to me. She votes against fair pay for women. She votes against the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which is just basically protecting us from domestic abuse and stalking. ...She thinks that if you're a gay couple or even if you look like a gay couple that you should be allowed to be kicked out of a restaurant. It's really basic human rights, and it's right and wrong at this point.⁸³⁵

Here, Swift's comments function to dramatize the political expectations of her pop star celebrity within the terms of modern liberalism arising out of the audience formations of pop music and the digital conditions of stardom today. Moreover, the scene, staged or not, comes to re-situate the hesitancy of Swift's political voice within the atmosphere of her familial and business relationships. Doing so aligns such political strength as not only a collective triumph for pro-gay and feminist politics but also a personally gendered one within the male-female dynamics of Swift's business family.

Additionally, *Miss Americana* grounds these gender politics further through her personal experience of sexual assault, thus representing another encounter in recent media that centers women's legal testimony within media production. Centering this issue through Swift's personal experience, such media present alternative venues for justice within the social and cultural space of media. The documentary specifically dramatizes the nature of women's legal testimony within a political and legal context that has proven ill-equipped to dealing with matters of legal and gender equity around sexual assault, despite intense media attention and public excitement on the issue. This tension is represented by chronicling Swift's own encounter with sexual assault when a

⁸³⁵ *Miss Americana*.

former radio DJ David Mueller had groped her during a photo op in 2013. While the DJ was fired, he sued the singer over defamation claims and financial loss at having lost his job. Swift, famously, sued the DJ for \$1, in her words, to “serve as an example to other women who may resist publicly reliving similar outrageous and humiliating acts.”⁸³⁶ While Swift, quite obviously, is a privileged subject herself, Wilson highlights the fear women face in the courtroom when providing legal testimony by de-centering Swift’s physical presence during her testimony through the use of digitally rendered images that showcase the pathos of this moment, in all its vulnerability, in Swift’s eyes. Over this image, Swift voices:

You walk into a courtroom and then there’s this person sitting in a swivel chair staring at you like you did something to him. The first thing they say to you in court is “why didn’t you scream? Why didn’t you react quicker? Why didn’t you stand further away from him? Then he has a lawyer get up and just lie. There were seven people who saw him do this, and we had a photo of it happening. And I was so angry. I was angry that I had to be there. I was angry that this happens to women. I was angry that people are paid to antagonize victims. I was angry that all the details had been twisted. You don’t feel a sense of any victory when you win because the process is so dehumanizing. This is with seven witnesses and a photo. What happens when you get raped and it’s your word against his.”⁸³⁷

Swift’s remarks develop feminist criticism of the legal process for rape and sexual assault survivors over the ways in which the presumption of innocence, a foundation of the U.S. legal system, places undue burden on women to gain material evidence of sexual assault crimes within the context of a policing and legal system that is not equipped to handle these claims effectively. Moreover, Swift voices criticism here of the ways in which counter-examinations can force women

⁸³⁶ *Miss Americana*.

⁸³⁷ *Ibid*.

to re-live the traumatic memories of their experience. For this reason, Swift's words speak to the realness of sexual assault as a political issue that has been centered in recent years over the rise of the #MeToo movement in entertainment and the highly contentious media spectacle of Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court. In doing so, *Miss Americana* works to use the rhetoric of individualism, through its focus on individual and usually privileged actors, as a means of localizing and providing greater emotional depth to political activism of the period. Thus, as a diva documentary, *Miss Americana* dramatizes the visibility of Swift's feminism for her public in ways that both advance and commodify such activism.

In both *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana*, their celebrity subjects do not explicitly interrogate their own relationship to such issues of race or class, preferring to keep their discourse outside the formal recognition of the ways in which their economic privilege renders not only the documentary but their life experience possible. While there are clear differences in the ideological bent of each documentary, the nearly eight years that separate their productions is not insignificant, particularly as the present political moment has catalyzed the entwining of political and cultural brands that is, in part, the focus of this dissertation. In *Part of Me*, the vagaries of electoral politics are far afield from Perry's emergence into the industry, while *Miss Americana*, a documentary text about Swift's struggle to remain culturally sympathetic, moves in quite intimate ways towards the scene of electioneering as part of a larger brand management strategy for the performer when faced with social media and public criticism about the absence of her voice in the 2016 presidential election. The situation of how these two documentary texts imagine cultural difference is primarily through the lens of gender and the discourses of sexuality that it animates around sexual expressiveness, sexual violence, and sexual orientation. This dynamic reflects the fact that the language of patriarchal control often collapses distinctions between issues of gender and sexuality, particularly

when considering overlapping dynamics between misogyny and homophobia. Moreover, these documentaries take up historically marginalized cultural identities in often essentialized ways, as critical sites of cultural and political precarity for individuals within U.S. society. While focusing on these forms of precarity, a muted examination of structural relationships between and amongst women is often absent, thus pointing to the ways in which substantive discussions of economic inequality are so often displaced from such branding texts.

Particularly in *Miss Americana*, there is little to no recognition of the non-professional classes of laborers who help make the Taylor Swift brand possible. While working to protect women politically, the absence of the women and men who help with such tasks as hair and makeup or scheduling and calendaring for the singer should be rightfully considered as glaring absences. Here, the conditions of visibility that animate the diva documentary are pivotal to recognize precisely for this reason. While representing a commodity built around women's political empowerment, this documentary's depiction of a political assertion of Swift's gendered self is afforded to her by the already highly visible nature of her stardom and the ways that she is able to commodify such visibility. It is this visibility, arrived at as a teen and amplified by the unfortunate encounter with Kanye West on the MTV stage, that allows *Miss Americana* to serve as both a piece of cultural branding *and* as a commodity sold for international distribution to media platforms like Netflix. Here, the focus on visibility vis-à-vis the logic and textual practices of branding works as a way in which both high-status celebrity female performers are rendered more culturally and economically valuable while minimizing reflection on the larger imbalances of gender representation in the music industry.

To be clear, this criticism is not an example of shifting goal posts as is sometimes alleged of cultural critics. Indeed, this branding project appears to respond to larger conversations aimed

at celebrities for rooting their engagements with politics around material possibilities of social change, such as Swift's advocacy for the Equality Act featured in the documentary. Rather, this critique recognizes the ways in which the diva's participation in the language of political and cultural visibility develops such language into aspects of branding that provide for little recognition of the everyday feminist causes around Swift, her career, and the distribution of economic returns to her staff and team. *Miss Americana*, further, represents scenes of Swift working on producing her next album within the masculinized settings of the music studio and the executive-style boardroom. Such scenes highlight the pop star as a laboring subject of not only sonic but also promotional labor for her own career. At the same time, this attention to the conditions of visibility that surround her stardom mutes the salience of other forms of gender politics within Swift's specific commercial industry. Through such silences, the terms of women's representation in the diva documentary is principally rooted in branded constructions of gendered visibility, not issues of equity in the workplace. Even as Swift currently labors to retain economic control over her recording assets in highly public feuds with Scooter Braun, the situation of the diva's feminist visibility works in tension with the paucity of attention to other working women in non-highly-visible roles of production, instrumentation, and styling.

The Diva as Gendered Embodiment of Neoliberal Meritocracy:

Near the start of the second half of *Part of Me*, Katy Perry is told the good news that her song "Last Friday Night" (2011) topped the Billboard charts, making it her fifth number one single on her breakout album *Teenage Dream* (2010). The documentary segues into a bricolage of visual clips that demonstrate the buzz that this accomplishment generated in the music industry. In what appears to be a local news clip, an unidentified female host informs her audience: "Katy Perry has just made pop music history doing something The Beatles never did, Elvis hasn't done it, not even

Madonna.”⁸³⁸ Shifting video segments, Heidi Klum appears at the 2011 American Music Awards ceremony to award Perry with an achievement as “the first woman in the history of pop music” to achieve five hit singles on an album, an accomplishment matched only by Michael Jackson. Continuing from Klum’s energetic announcement, Perry’s accomplishments are celebrated by other luminaries in the field as Adele, Lady Gaga, Jessie J, and Rihanna. In many ways, this segment of the documentary works as the dramatic high of Perry’s career arc and is positioned in the terms of her hard-working approach and energetic playfulness. Here, this forging of a brand association through discourses of meritocracy are critical for understanding the intersections of economic and gender ideologies that come to roost in the figure of the modern diva.

Reflecting upon contemporary cultural conditions, Jo Littler challenges traditional discourses of meritocracy that assert hard work and talent will provide social mobility whatever one’s original social or economic position. Littler writes:

On the contrary: the idea of meritocracy has become a key means through which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite – perpetuates, reproduces, and extends itself. Meritocracy has become the key means of cultural legitimation for contemporary capitalist culture.⁸³⁹

Characterized as an ideological discourse, Littler identifies five critical problems of meritocratic discourse as a social system. In the first issue, sociologists remain skeptical of meritocracy’s claims of social equality through hard work, finding that economic opportunity in the U.S. is still largely located around where individuals started in the first place. The second problem is that meritocracy

⁸³⁸ *Part of Me*.

⁸³⁹ Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power, and Myths of Mobility* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 2.

tends to presume essentialized and innate traits that, if carried to its logical ends, can be used in the legitimation of eugenicist projects, certainly as it ennobles a form of individualist action in the private sphere while advocating for austerity approaches to public problems that may have disparate impacts on various racial communities. A third key issue is that meritocracy's language of hard work functions to obscure the difficulty of social mobility for some classes of people. Relatedly, the fourth problem is the way that such class differences in meritocratic contexts produce the valorization of particular forms of status.⁸⁴⁰ She writes: "contemporary meritocracy's frequent validation of upper-middle-class values as norms to aspire to and its rendering of working-class cultures as abject."⁸⁴¹ And lastly, the fifth problem with meritocracy identified in Littler's work is that meritocratic narratives of success frequently obscure larger cultural and economic differences between individuals by often working to extend them. Here, this last problem points to the ways that meritocratic myths often obscure the structural ways in which class itself is produced in such national contexts as the United States. In identifying these problems, Littler's research delineates how such cultural discourses work to enforce, rationalize, and produce imaginations about economic hierarchies through the perceived fairness of meritocracy as a guarantor of their legitimacy.

This meritocratic logic is produced directly in Perry's *Part of Me* in its focus on the travails of pursuing stardom and the endurance of Perry's gendered self as an economic actor. While *Part of Me* and even *Miss Americana* cultivate a perception of the ordinariness of their successful stars through the inclusion of home video footage, such visual media also works to cut against this impression. Such footage in these documentaries often condenses, in highly visible ways, how

⁸⁴⁰ Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 4-8.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

long such stars have been at the work of recording and working in commercial industry. This footage, as discussed earlier, is shown through personal video diary entries that Perry made while transitioning out of her religious music period. Moreover, *Miss Americana* features images of some of the first live shows Swift did since starting her music career around age fourteen. As such documentaries imagine the diva as an embodiment of meritocratic success, such discursive framings obfuscate that such fame is not only exceptional but also not necessarily available to anyone once they've entered their mid-to-late twenties. This aspect of the lacking diversity of age represented by the recruitment of diva celebrity undermines one of the key myths of meritocracy which is that success is universal in its possibility.

Part of Me embodies these central tensions in the vital fiction of meritocracy for a capitalist U.S. society. When pausing on this career accomplishment, additional commentators emphasize the hard-working nature of Perry, while accentuating her eccentricities and self-expression as fundamental for the self-authoring of her career's many projects. Her manager, Bradford Cobb, states: "It took us five years to get a record out. But we never gave up because she never gave up. It's hard not to get emotional because her career just blew up."⁸⁴² In doing so, the testimonies of Cobb and others work to depict the Perry persona as not only a version of unparalleled female excellence in the music industry but a larger embodiment of the idea that hard work and following one's vision are the cornerstones of success. Absent in this commentary are systems of media promotion, advertising, and brand partnerships that come involved in packaging music and entertainers to the U.S. public. In fact, such systems of branding and promotion figure in the documentary as lacking belief in Perry's authenticity and vision for her career, even while *Part of Me* as a documentary text represents the success of such branding and promotional practices. Here,

⁸⁴² *Part of Me*.

career success is mystified through the language of the self as the site of originality, authenticity, and hard work. In doing so, such narratives of meritocratic success work to disorder our perspective about the extant factory models of the cultural industries and the ways in which artists are traded and negotiated across labels and studios. Inserted in their place, narratives about the ordinariness of the celebrity persona are produced as ways in which the universalism of meritocracy is asserted and maintained in U.S. media culture, even while faced with evidence that such claims are compromised.

During the early part of the 2010s, the subject of wealth inequality and the perceived failures of a meritocratic neoliberal state exploded into the mainstream of popular intellectual criticism. Writing in 2012, MSNBC's Chris Hayes diagnosed in *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* that the social contract between the U.S.'s rich and poor remained in tatters, reflecting the degrees of cynicism produced by economic, political, religious, and academic institutions that all seemed embroiled in some scandal or another. Hayes seeks to understand the roots of this crisis in the tensions that resulted in the greater elevation of cultural minorities into economic prosperity even while overall economic inequities deepened. A primary object of suspicion towards meritocracy that marked this period, Hayes's work, shrewdly, points out the perplexing state of discourse in poorly functioning meritocratic environments:

While faith in America's meritocratic promise is shared up and down the social hierarchy and across the political spectrum, it is particularly strong among those who have scaled its highest heights. Naturally the winners are tempted to conclude that the system that conferred outside benefits on them knew what it was doing. So even as the meritocracy

produces failing, distrusted institutions, massive inequality, and an increasingly detached elite, it also produces a set of leaders who hold it in high regard.⁸⁴³

Viewed against Hayes's diagnosis of falling public trust in social institutions, this high regard by elites, moreover, can be directly observed in Perry's *Part of Me*, particularly as the documentary works as a model of textual branding through ideologies of American-ness and gender through such firm beliefs in the fantasies of the self as an economic agent.

These meritocratic narratives, moreover, are themselves not produced in isolation, taking place within the context of a neoliberal political state and its economic policies that have done much to ossify class inequities and hierarchies over the past half century. In many ways, neoliberal governance policy, in its belief in the market for providing solutions to public policy and thus requiring private economic transactions in the place of public services, requires meritocratic fictions in order to be viewed as a legitimate system. The reason for this is relatively simple, which is that the displacement of policy solutions from the state to private actors in the marketplace must be understood as a fair, deliberative process in which private economic actors assume responsibility for themselves as a broader societal good. Here, the examples of meritocratic narratives, i.e. breakthrough and comeback stories, presented in such diva texts build on associations with forms of feminist sentiment while positioning such empowerment within larger class fictions like neoliberalism. In doing so, these documentaries illustrate the growing compatibility of feminist and neoliberal political discourse through the textual practices of celebrity branding.

⁸⁴³ Chris Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012), 31.

Through a variety of mechanisms, the diva documentary works to produce these meritocratic discourses as one way in which the reception of such extreme wealth and celebrity are disciplined through and around *national questions*. It is not incidental that such films as *Part of Me* and *Miss Americana* provide distinct opportunities and forums for the legitimization of the conditions of visibility for their featured performers. Yet, moreover, it also points to the ways in which the diva's gendered entrepreneurialism in the marketplace is mirrored in such documentary texts, particularly as these branding strategies work to anchor economies of visibility and gender as a commodified object. In these textual encounters, a new language that mixes elements of gendered visibility with the aspirational values of the U.S. cultural and political system are critical ways in which national mythologies find recourse to gender as a way of rationalizing key breakdowns in the social contract and political system through highly visible and spectacular instances like the cultural industries. For this reason, the diva poses itself as a significant site for studying how the branding language of economic success and feminist discourse are sustained by larger projects of neoliberal self-governance, as the fictions of meritocracy work to legitimize the extreme inequality produced by such systems while offering a model for economically rewarded private virtue. Recognizing this collapsing of rhetoric around economic self-determination and forms of feminist feeling in the diva's gendered discourse is to call attention to the ways that the promised visibility of the politics of representation has yielded new topographies of class domination, both classist *and* implicitly feminist in its terms of individualism. Such topographies can be so persuasive, precisely, through the potency of the diva's emotional intimacy and authenticity in such non-fiction branding texts. For this reason, these branding archives, such as biographic documentaries, represent significant objects of inquiry for understanding not only the

braiding of cultural and political identities but also the ways in which cultural commodities play out renewed promises of American meritocracy in the diva's gendering of neoliberalism.

Conclusion:
Diva Citizenship in the Era of Deregulation:

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), Lauren Berlant considers the public testimony of Anita Hill against Justice Clarence Thomas. She analyzes Hill's testimony as a discourse about legal citizenship in the workplace and, in doing so, posits this testimony as a performance of "diva citizenship." For Berlant, this type of performance refers to political acts in the public sphere that represent a "dramatic coup" by re-narrating "the dominant history" of the subject and its body in order to challenge the speaker's audience to identify with the speaker, i.e. the diva, and "the enormity of the suffering she has narrated."⁸⁴⁴ In this way, such acts of citizenship are defined by their "heroic pedagogy" as appeals to the imagined liberal subject who is presumed to be capable of learning and changing after deliberative thought. As such, diva citizenship negotiates the body's representation to others in an act of self-narration that trusts the innocence of privileged actors to respond to "the sublimity of reason."⁸⁴⁵

Further, Berlant emphasizes that diva citizenship occurs during "extraordinary political paralysis" that forces acts of language to offer their own political labor whose effects in public can "feel like explosives that shake the ground of collective existence."⁸⁴⁶ For this reason, Berlant structures an attention to the performance of diva-ness as a cathartic performative discourse, as her language emphasizes the ecstasies of feeling and its release with such acts ("dramatic coup" & "like explosives"). This ecstasy, for Berlant, provides the possibility that such rhetoric might be confused for sustained social action, offering a form of misrecognition of the self's narration and its constraints to engender social and political change. For this reason, these acts of language

⁸⁴⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 222-223.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid, 223.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

represent “spectacle of subjectivity” designed to facilitate the self’s claim to representation within public life as an effect of self-narration. Diva citizenship, therefore, helps organize the performative subjectivity of social bodies and transform their public recognition through the capacity of language to make ourselves feel represented to and by others through intimate feeling. This performative subjectivity, constructed through the language of identity, politics, and branding, is a critical feature of diva celebrity and its political promise throughout the 20th-century.

The modern performing “diva,” more pop star than Anita Hill, is the descendant of the female opera star in a convergent media ecosystem. Throughout the latter half of the 20th-century, this diva has renewed her ideological and industrial charge. Diva worship now exceeds its initial cultural boundaries and demonstrates its efficacy as a model of political identification rooted in cultural approaches to politics. One tentative thesis that emerges when reviewing this history is that the populism of the diva works, in postmodern fashion, to center political discourse around media and cultural representation. However, this form of celebrity demonstrates real political effects. The imagination of the diva, to this point, has become a part of the lexicon in how we imagine women as political actors. For an article in *The Advocate*, Michelangelo Signorile, writing about Hillary Clinton on the eve of her senatorial run in 2000, turned to the diva as a metaphor for the potential emotional identification with Clinton as a woman in politics. Entitled “Hillary: Viva la Diva!” Signorile’s column starts with a sexist remark from a ‘hot’ microphone incident with a Florida TV anchor who referred to Clinton as “the old battle-ax.”⁸⁴⁷ It is this slip of the tongue, for Signorile, that shifts the perception of Clinton’s political identity. Despite a documented paucity of support for LGBTQ+ issues throughout the 1990s, Clinton, through the ostensible misogyny covered in the term “battle-ax,” is positioned into “a bygone Hollywood era, a time when brassy

⁸⁴⁷ Michelangelo Signorile, “Hillary: Viva la Diva!” *The Advocate*, September 14, 1999, 49.

women who had the gall to take charge were openly and publicly demeaned by men.”⁸⁴⁸ In fact, this term as a way of denigrating and marking what Kathleen Rowe Karlyn might term “unruly women” seemed to evoke the perceived tragedy of women in the media industries for Signorile directly:

It’s not hard to imagine Hollywood mogul Jack Warner calling Bette Davis a “battle-ax” in 1936, when she used her populist appeal to wage war against him, demanding – and getting – better screen roles, more money, and star billing. And it’s quite conceivable that the executives at Pepsi-Cola Co. mumbled “battle-ax” to one another when Joan Crawford marched into their offices in 1959 and told them she was now going to take her deceased husband’s place on the board of directors.⁸⁴⁹

While self-consciously glib, Signorile’s article represents a common way in which the diva, as a cultural reference informed by an archive of tough women performers, has posed a compelling metaphor for gendered political identification.

Referencing President Clinton’s political difficulties of the period, Signorile observes that “as the impeachment trial came to an end, Hillary recast herself yet again ... and in the public’s eyes became the self-made woman who had been taken advantage of by the ingrates who surrounded her, a woman who wasn’t going to take it any more [*sic*] and who was ready to do something for herself.”⁸⁵⁰ This positioning of Clinton as a diva was connected to the perception of a renewed personal agency and self-avowal aligning political support with Clinton, despite her then-lack of support for gay rights, based on an emotional identification with her outsider status

⁸⁴⁸ Signorile, “Hillary: Viva la Diva!” *The Advocate*.

⁸⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

as a woman in politics.⁸⁵¹ The profile would later slip into a certain kind of wish fulfillment, as *The Advocate* writer envisioned Clinton's presence in Congress as an opportunity to "tell the crotchety old guys that this is not her first time at the rodeo," an allusion to the line Faye Dunaway made famous in her portrayal of Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (1981).⁸⁵² Signorile's accounting of Clinton's diva-ness – however productively explored in his article – puts together a material example about the ways in which the narratives and discourses generated out of diva celebrity work to produce imaginations about female power by drawing on women's highly visible struggle in the media industries as a metaphorical point of self-identification. These points of self-identification matter precisely as they illustrate a typology of how identity rhetoric in media culture forges political allegiances through the positioning of an essentialized vision of womanhood. This view of gender gathers political capital by its easy re-situation into other forms of social difference, such as *The Advocate*'s LGBTQ+ audience, within these narratives of (white) womanhood. This form of diva citizenship is one that offers a juncture or intersection between the sovereign environments of the cultural marketplace and political elections in ways that allow scholars to understand how new ideologies of gender, sexuality, and race, arising from the success of various civil rights movements, have been incorporated into new ideological projects. At the same time, such examples of these phenomena, not entirely banal, represent individuated nodes in a larger data sample about the ways in which forms of visibility politics situated around left-of-center

⁸⁵¹ In fact, Hillary Clinton would reject the premise that she was representative of the political establishment during her 2016 candidacy, citing that her gender identity meant that she did not 'exemplify' the establishment as no woman has yet to serve in the office of the U.S. presidency. Political reporting on the event, understandably, rejected Clinton's self-characterization, but this moment is a deeply intriguing one for the politics of female power that the figure of the diva organizes and represents in media culture. See: Conor Friedersdorf, "Of Course Hillary Clinton Exemplifies the Establishment," *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/of-course-hillary-clinton-is-part-of-the-establishment/460125>.

⁸⁵² Signorile, "Hillary: Viva la Diva!".

ideologies of cultural recognition have been put into tension with other forms of materialist politics.

In fact, the 2016 presidential election, in which Hillary Clinton was the Democratic Party nominee, illustrated the persistence of this culturally forged political allegiance with the diva and the ways that neoliberal political coalitions continue to draw on the language of liberal feminism in its address to the nation. Katy Perry, who featured on the *Divas Live* special in 2010 to support the U.S. troops, had taken up a prominent position in campaigning for the first major party female nominee. In October 2015, Perry performed for a Clinton rally in Iowa before the Democratic Party's annual Jefferson-Jackson Dinner in Des Moines.⁸⁵³ At the 2016 Democratic National Convention, Perry performed her recent single "Rise" in partnership with the Summer Olympics and girl power anthem "Roar," two commercial empowerment anthems that took on a resolutely political charge within the feminist moment of Clinton's nomination.⁸⁵⁴ Notably, Clinton's closing campaign ad would feature this latter song in battleground states like Florida, Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Such prominence of the music, perhaps, reflected the range of personal and cultural associations with Perry's stature in the music industry that many hoped would deliver Clinton decisive victories.⁸⁵⁵ Perry, further, was not alone in her endorsement of Clinton, as it practically became an industry expectation for pop divas, as Beyoncé, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and Miley Cyrus all worked to mobilize their fans and audiences in support of Clinton's victory. Self-described feminist, Taylor Swift, in fact, had been publicly excoriated for her lack of criticism towards

⁸⁵³ Matthew Leimkuehler, "Katy Perry Roars at Hillary Clinton Rally," *Des Moines Register*, October 24, 2015, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/10/24/katy-perry-roars-hillary-clinton-rally-jackson-jefferson-dinner/74477412>.

⁸⁵⁴ Sarah Grant, "Watch Katy Perry 'Rise' and 'Roar' for Hillary Clinton at DNC," *Rolling Stone*, July 29, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/watch-katy-perry-rise-and-roar-for-hillary-clinton-at-dnc-123015>.

⁸⁵⁵ Katie Reilly, "Hillary Clinton Features Katy Perry's 'Roar' in Battleground Campaign Ad," *Time*, November 5, 2016, <https://time.com/4559589/hillary-clinton-katy-perry-roar-campaign-ad>.

Donald Trump as a candidate during the 2016 electoral cycle, so much so, it appears, that this criticism would lead to public imaginings, however sincere, about whether Swift was the pop-star of the alt-right.⁸⁵⁶ *Splinter*'s Kelsey McKinney criticized Swift for not speaking out after the *Access Hollywood* tape, arguing:

Taylor Swift did not say a word. She stayed silent on social media in the wake of this political controversy, as she has for the entirety of this campaign cycle. She's been silent on the hundreds of misogynistic and racist comments Trump has made, silent on who she will vote for in November—silent on whether she'll vote at all. It's surely an intentional decision on her part, to avoid controversy and maintain the allegiance of all of her fans.⁸⁵⁷

This silence was the very one managed and discussed in Swift's *Miss Americana* (2020) biography vehicle, as discussed in Chapter Four. Contrasting Swift's approach, Perry had taken this promotional interest in the visibility of her political campaigning to even greater lengths when she decided to dress as the nominee for actress Kate Hudson's annual Halloween costume party.⁸⁵⁸ Similar dynamics continued throughout the 2020 presidential election. Days after Super Tuesday

⁸⁵⁶ When Swift would come out in favor of LGBTQ equal rights and critiquing white supremacy, her public statements would attract national headlines over her discomfoting of a vocal alt-right contingent in her fandom. See: Sinéad Baker, "The Alt-Right is Calling Taylor Swift a 'Traitor,' after She Broke Her Political Silence to Endorse Democrats," *Business Insider*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/taylor-swift-called-traitor-by-alt-right-after-democrat-endorsements-2018-10>.

⁸⁵⁷ Kelsey McKinney, "It's Time for Taylor Swift To Say Something About Donald Trump," *Splinter*, October 10, 2016, <https://splinternews.com/it-s-time-for-taylor-swift-to-say-something-about-donal-1793862658>.

⁸⁵⁸ Mitchell Peters, "Katy Perry Dresses as Hillary Clinton for Halloween," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 29, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/katy-perry-dresses-as-hillary-clinton-halloween-942313>.

in the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary, LGBT-targeted press outlet *NewNowNext* would ask its audience: “Who Are Your Favorite Divas Voting for in 2020?”⁸⁵⁹⁸⁶⁰

To be clear, this dynamic cannot be entirely explained by questions of elitist political organizing, pointing to the difficult conditions for understanding the dynamic between an elite media culture and populist grassroots within the contemporary landscape of the U.S. In an editorial for *Page Six* after the 2016 presidential election, Maureen Callahan argued that “celebrity endorsements in presidential politics don’t matter anymore,” even going so far as to suggest these endorsements themselves hurt.⁸⁶¹ Callahan’s article offered up familiar criticisms about the dearth of expertise in American life, writing that social media has given celebrities “a platform to express their opinions on any issue, no matter how banal,” while asking provocatively how often questions of inequality were addressed in the feeds of such stars as Justin Bieber, Kim Kardashian, or Harry Styles. Highlighting the detachment of a wealthy media apparatus and its public-facing performers from “a mainstream America,” Callahan calls attention to the picture of the forgotten man, a Nixonian image that she aligns with the image of the white working class male voter that dominated political coverage after Clinton failed to win the presidency. Chairman of BGR Group and political consultant Ed Rogers, in his digital editorial for *The Washington Post*, seemed to echo Callahan’s critique of such elitism more bluntly:

⁸⁵⁹In the 2020 presidential primary, Bernie Sanders, in particular, received attention from a number of Hollywood music celebrities positioned towards the youth audience, as Ariana Grande and Cardi B received promotional press for their public support. Claire Shaffer, “Ariana Grande Breaks Free from Capitalism, Endorses Bernie Sanders,” *Rolling Stone*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/ariana-grande-bernie-sanders-915571>.

⁸⁶⁰ See: Sam Manzella, “Who Are Your Favorite Divas Voting for in 2020?” *NewNowNext*, March 6, 2020, <http://www.newnownext.com/how-pop-divas-are-voting-in-2020-cher-barbra-streisand-lady-gaga-dua-lipa/03/2020>.

⁸⁶¹ Maureen Callahan, “Why Celebrity Endorsements Didn’t Help Hillary At All,” *Page Six*, November 12, 2016, <https://pagesix.com/2016/11/12/why-celebrity-endorsements-didnt-help-hillary-at-all>.

“Did the phony, hypocritical liberal celebrities who made fools of themselves during the 2016 campaign not get the memo? I am specifically referring to all the useful post-election analysis that should have clued them in to how little their opinions mattered in the political realm, and what their utility might be in the future.”⁸⁶²

The irony of a political consultant calling out such forms of elitism was apparently lost within the article, yet this absence points to a continued misperception about such brand partnerships as a simply a manner of elitist political communication, rather than conditions of media citizenship and the national promises of contemporary brand culture.

As covered in Chapter Three, the sense of an innate political connection between entertainment and the Democratic political establishment has roots in the 1960s and 1970s as part of a larger reaction to the political turmoil of the period, as young voters became thought of as a political and public entity among the first times in national and media history. As film and television pursued the music industry into an embrace of the youth demographic, performers increasingly came to be viewed as political avatars for this demographic group. Of these avatars, figures of diva-ness have served recurring roles within this dynamic since Barbra Streisand campaigned for McGovern in her Rock ‘n Rhetoric concerts with Warren Beatty and Carole King among others. This coalition between diva celebrity and the Democratic Party intensified, in part, as the byproduct of a public relations battle waged by the music industry against calls for censorship from the new religious right and its associations with southern Democrats in the 1980s and 1990s. While in the 2000s and 2010s, this allegiance of diva celebrity in figures like Lady Gaga and Beyoncé became attached and anchored to the development of social media as a platform

⁸⁶² Ed Rogers, “Politically Illiterate Democratic Celebrities Continue to Embarrass Themselves,” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2017/01/25/politically-illiterate-democratic-celebrities-continue-to-embarrass-themselves>

of interactive engagement with young fans. Within these emergent cultural conditions, shifting ideologies of gender, sexuality, and race came to the fore in the branding materials of the diva, as their documentaries drew out branded imaginations of feminism, gay activism, and anti-racism as ways of disciplining the ideological value of their diva commodity.

Understanding this history is one that helps demonstrate the ways in which media industry discourses labor over the representation of its audience within the perspective of its media productions, perspectives that are further constructed and extended through paratextual, promotional materials from music videos to celebrity interviews to social media postings. Far from simply being a matter of cultural elitism, the figure of the diva has absorbed debates around feminism as a rhetoric of gendered populism in an industry that discursively imagines the consumers of pop music as women. As these divas come to perform fantasies of national citizenship, their attention to issues of authenticity has amplified media discourses that position the diva around ideas of representativeness with respect to her fans and contested invocations of public & national life. This cultivation of their reception as cultural and political avatars is significant in so far as it represents a populist imagination of the audience through the diva's public performance, even while recognizing that such reception itself reflects ongoing attempts by privileged actors and advertising in their conflation of racial and gendered visibility in media industry as mirrored representations of shifting ideologies of social identity, nationality, and publicness.

Commenting on the deregulation of public interest requirements of media in the 1980s, communications historian Robert Britt Horwitz has observed that "The Reagan administration came to power in 1980 on a program of reducing the size of government and getting government out of the economy. The dismantling of regulation—particularly *social* regulation—loomed large

in these plans.”⁸⁶³ No longer faced with regulatory burdens by the FCC, the ground for controlling television according to public interest values was ceded to the marketplace in which, as Sarah Banet-Weiser has described it, “television viewers had the “choice” to turn off the television set if it was not providing adequate fare.”⁸⁶⁴ Whereas in the old regime of media regulation, the distribution of media was considered subject to non-market values in which news media, in particular, were required to offer a balanced reporting of ideological perspectives in their programming (i.e. “fairness doctrine” requirements). In the new regime of media deregulation, the principal regulatory forces were consumers through the economic value of their attention for the media and advertising industries. It is within this context of the late 1980s in which cable programming continued to develop and expand, often by drawing on the language of consumer choice and a greater diversity of programming. Such rhetoric worked to position media consumption as a system of representation in which the consumer was *represented* by media of their *choice*. That such resulting media illustrated the continued market forces approximating and disciplining consumer viewing habits is one reason among many to be dubious of claims of *true* or *authentic* representativeness. Yet, moreover, this rhetoric also encouraged associations with media consumption to be felt as political in and of itself as the increasing display of ideological values (from race to gender to other issues) came to be used as self-definitional and representative in the branding practices of artists in a political situation that disagreed over the cultural ramifications of post-war civil rights debates. This dynamic, moreover, is significant for understanding how forms of national belonging, typically conceived as culminating in participation with the political state, intensified their displacement onto commercial media, in part,

⁸⁶³ Robert Britt Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 264.

⁸⁶⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule*, 50.

through media deregulation. Commenting on the stripping of the state's public functions, Henry Giroux writes that "the obligations of citizenship" become "narrowly defined through the imperatives of consumption and the dynamics of the market place, commercial space replaces noncommodified public spheres."⁸⁶⁵

With this history in mind, the modern diva represents, in some senses, the success of a culture-based notion of citizenship in which private selves and brands work to give 'voice' to the consumer within the cultural marketplace. This history can be traced back to the discourses that surrounded the diva as a figure of performance within the 19th-century, as cultural ideologies of uplift became a useful way of disciplining consumption practices according to specific imaginations of gender, domesticity, and high culture. These uplift ideologies fulfilled branding mechanisms aimed at managing the bricolage of ethnic and social difference found in urban settings in order to turn music and other cultural commodities into national consumer goods. Other ideologies surrounding this figure included the celebration of the American diva as an example of the new cultural and economic position of the United States on the global stage that became a defining element in early 20th-century publicity strategies. Turning to the development of the systems of commodification and genre formation that marked the phonograph recording industries, the operatic diva and the blues diva came to satisfy respective audience niches that were viewed through industrial categories like genre as deeply racialized. While competition for the African-American market featured a discourse of racial uplift through the designation of such phonograph recordings as 'race' records, these records, problematic as we view them now, also evoked understandings of racial liberalism for white audiences. This categorization of music worked to

⁸⁶⁵ Henry A. Giroux, "Pedagogy of the Depressed: Beyond the New Politics of Cynicism," *College Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Fall 2001): 2.

collapse distinctions between the cultural essence of performers and music performance as a system of cultural representation in and of itself, a dynamic that is made more obvious when understanding how racialized music became commodified by a series of other ancillary recording industries like radio or the soundies, among others. Moreover, tensions around consumer citizenship and the desire to integrate the cultural marketplace came to embody 1950s media critiques of national culture, as the Black diva came to be a celebrated figure not only at the Metropolitan Opera House but also on television and in Hollywood as Black stardom became a cultural brand in terms of larger debates about media and consumer activism. And indeed, in some senses, these cultural ideologies of branding have persisted in post-Civil Rights divas as performers mark out their embodiments of racial integration through markers of their own historicity within national culture.

These very dynamics around the citizenship practices of cultural consumption have been existent in U.S. art traditions since at least the 19th-century, but they have intensified over the past forty years as a result of not only the ideological polarization of the civil rights movements between the 1950s and 1970s but also the intense diversification of media for consumers. This diversification has particularly encouraged an intensified address of media to specific cultural identities, hierarchies, and landscapes in ways that have positioned media as integral for in-group cultural dynamics that fit within larger strategies of niche demographic targeting and advertising. The result, now on full display over the first decade of social media's interactive engagement with audiences, has been the development of commercial media's address to contested constructions of national identity through performances of race, gender, and sexuality within the forms of publicness that constitute our contemporary media culture.

The Diva's Bow: Charting Future Directions

Throughout “The American Diva,” I have argued for the identification of a genealogy of “diva celebrity” as one way of understanding a contested but privatized understanding of culture-based citizenship. Many of the figures, arriving in conjunction and after the successes of civil rights movements from the 1950s to the 1970s, have turned towards grounding their performance of stardom with the charge of the historically real ways in which gender, race, and sexuality remain as dividing lines in American society. To demonstrate this process, I addressed the longer histories of popular music consumption and the branding of music personalities across the 20th-century through consumer relationships as authentic and intimate. Therefore, in this dissertation, I argued that the branding of women’s bodies in popular culture conditions a rhetorical display of their body as itself a historical force within the history of women’s representation *and* within the history of the nation. Throughout this analysis, I paid particular attention to the historical context of how the music industry, in response to government labeling efforts and parental fears about children, reframed its public relations discourse to specifically articulate the politically expressive agency of its performers in opposition to what they characterized as censorship efforts by Tipper Gore and others. In doing this, I framed how this public relations discourse, featured prominently on MTV throughout the early 1990s, disciplined diva celebrity itself as a site of a very specific representation of national contestation in American culture that was not far off in its significance from other cultural debates about the role of government in intervening within the continuing circumstances of discrimination around race, gender, and sexuality. In grounding my analysis of this complex branding system of national signification for music celebrity, this dissertation asserts that diva celebrity not only demonstrates the interweaving of cultural consumption as a site of politics in postmodernity, but that this form of celebrity produces a textual encounter that

instantiates such performances as the site of political and historical contestation that come to function as constitutive elements of the diva's larger brand.

As Chapter One explored, the diva is not only a historically rooted performance figure that became associated with the challenging of gendered hierarchies and histories but also came to serve as an industrialized figure in the appropriation of celebrity for branding early sound and film industries by calibrating ideologies of Americanness, cultural uplift, and civilizational achievements of art and technology. Throughout this continuing history, representations of female celebrity in music have seized on their broader signification as social subjects, speaking to the various dividing lines in American society. In establishing this rhetorical framework, I traced the critical lineage from high cultural domains of opera to its manifestations in Black female singers from the 1950s to the 1970s before showing diva-ness's increasing mobility as an industrial term of art throughout the 1990s and 2000s for figures like Beyoncé, Mariah Carey, Jennifer Lopez, and Nicki Minaj among others. My approach situated this diva as the subject of media publicity whose framings and centering of intimacy with her fans translates the embodied histories of identity into media attention. Thus, while very few celebrities merely define themselves in terms of these social and intimate identities, their willingness to center their publicity discourse within these terms allows them to function as representative of broader identity-based communities in the U.S. Taking this into account, I argued that female music celebrity seizes on these conditions of identity in domestic and global politics as among the range of meanings that circulate around these stars and upon which fans and audience communities invest as social signifiers of their own personal, lived histories.

This project, crucially, recovers the place of intimacy as a site of politics that functions in relation to the sphere of entertainment and the strategies of crossover stardom by popular music stars that draw on the performance legacies of the diva to give form and authenticity to their status as public women and bodies in American life. To this point, I have illustrated across this dissertation, using an array of conceptual frameworks from theories of popular music, fandom, feminist media studies, and Black critical studies, an analysis of how diva celebrity not only exploits but also intervenes in dominant imaginations about gendered and racial hierarchies of social and cultural power in the United States. By using this interdisciplinary set of theories to analyze the various ways in which female music celebrity negotiates these bodies as discursive sites of identity, my dissertation, thus, shifted away from dominant trends in scholarship that highlight and underscore the authenticity of cultural activism via media feminisms in order to interrogate the deeper systems of culture that intensify the stakes of such authenticity and activism. In doing so, my dissertation offers a different lens in studying how these women can be understood as a genre of celebrity and performance marked by national debates about the status of women, their bodies, and their capacity to be expressive, public subjects within the U.S. In recovering this history, I center gendered constructions of celebrity within broader practices of disciplining the perception of cultural consumption and media technologies as a consumer good.

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to materialize and organize a range of debates that are particularly pressing in the enjoining of entertainment and politics that began decades ago in the music industry but have become more explicit within the past decade. Not only did I evaluate iconographies and ideologies of various performances of womanhood, I demonstrated how an attention to the various competing histories and contexts of pop music offered a more grounded approach in how to read representations of female celebrity critically. In

many ways, my conceptual framework privileges how certain types of celebrity are branded as broadly representative figures capable of intervening in the social and political histories through which we imagine our own existence in the world. This framing, as I mentioned earlier, grounds these celebrity and their performing bodies as productive sites of intimacy, illustrating what Kobena Mercer has referred to as the “burden of representation” or how artists “positioned in the margins ...of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as ‘representatives’ in the sense that they are expected to ‘speak for’ the ... communities from which they come.”⁸⁶⁶ This idea of publicness and representativeness shapes my dissertation’s engagement with the celebrities analyzed and studied here for what it illustrates about the displacement of citizenship onto media production and the resulting promotional and branding discourses that arise to discipline these reading practices for audiences.

As I move forward with this project, I hope to expand and better draw out this notion of diva celebrity as a way of intervening and managing ongoing debates in the public sphere that have coalesced around President Barack Obama’s fears of “call-out” or “cancel culture” or its conservative mirror in what President Donald Trump has attacked reductively as “critical race theory.”⁸⁶⁷ My plan is to understand the ways in which public discourse of the past decade, which is often used as brand potential for the diva, cannot be understood nor separated from the failures of neoliberal public policy. These practices of branding have anchored dimensions and intense identifications with consumer citizenship in the marketplace through cultural consumption against a secure attachment to the state as the venue for policy solutions. When practices of citizenship

⁸⁶⁶ Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” 62.

⁸⁶⁷ See: Emily S. Rueb and Derrick Bryson Taylor, “Obama on Call-Out Culture: ‘That’s Not Activism,’” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/us/politics/obama-woke-cancel-culture.html>; Maggie Haberman, “Trump Moves to Cancel Contracts for Government Sensitivity Training,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/04/us/politics/trump-race-sensitivity-training.html>.

have been displaced into the domain of the marketplace, processes of branding take up and commodify failures of the state's inaction on public crises. Reflective of these developments, deliberative failures of President Reagan's handling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic or the botched provisions of equal justice in President Clinton's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy were translated into the cultural marketplace as opportunities for media brands as far-wielding as Madonna to NBC's *Will & Grace*. Situated within these brands among others is the recognition that consumer activism has long been part of the root of civil rights struggles in the U.S., despite more than occasional efforts by critics and scholars to dismiss the marketplace as a legitimate site of political activism. If belonging is not a national value attributed to the state, cultural activism in the marketplace, through the value of the consumer's purse, absorbs these dimensions of political feeling.

Further, the struggle to retain access to the marketplace is, further, one that is ongoing as judicial caselaw in *Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018) continues to lack resolution around the ability of religious objections to be used as the grounds for denying LGBTQ+ individuals goods and services. It is precisely this environment of a real and continued powerlessness of the American public that, in a public discourse now dominated by social media in the news media, such "canceling" of entertainment figures is partially viewed as a legitimate form of consumer activism to set new boundaries and cultural expectations for the empowered. Of course, like any process bearing a resemblance akin to democracy like consumer-choice, such cultural activism is, indeed, turbulent, not always finding an ideal course of justice. Based on the terms of this dissertation, cultural activism through practices of branding must be understood through privatized notions of citizenship that place economic actors like performers and entertainers as embodiments of national identity for a public denied political change through the halls of Congress. In recognizing this situation, the display of intimacy figured by the diva has

much to offer our understanding of these issues, and these resonances will be the larger aims of my intellectual project moving forward. As tensions around the braiding of culture and politics continue to drive not only media brands but also political logic, it appears that the 19th-century diva is not ready to give her final bow.

Appendix:

In the timeline below, I detail key changes to *Billboard's* chart methodologies that reflect the development of new consumption patterns of consumers and the changing technologies used to distribute music. The publication, founded in 1894 by William Donaldson and James Hennegan, originally covered a broad configuration of entertainment industries from circuses, fairs and early cinema to burlesque shows. In the ensuing decades, *Billboard* cornered the market on covering the music industry due to the rising popularity of jukeboxes, phonographs, and radio, thus pointing to the tensions around medium specificity that emerged in the early decades of the 20th-century. Though not exhaustively presented here, I chronicle these shifting measures of the music industry as they pose industrial dynamics for the promotional work of diva celebrity.

1936: *Billboard* publishes its first “hit parade.”

1940: *Billboard* introduces “Chart Line” to track the best-selling records.

1944: *Billboard* begins measuring jukebox records through its “Music Box Machine” chart.

1957: *Billboard* discontinues its measuring of jukebox plays.

1958: *Billboard* introduces its all-genre singles chart the “Hot 100,” which has largely served as the industry standard for measuring commercial success.

1998: *Billboard* allows singles to track on the basis of airplay alone without physical sales, reflecting the difficulties of radio and MTV hits in finding representation on their charts.

2005: *Billboard* begins using digital sales as a factor in its music singles charts, reflecting the growth of the digital market at the expense of physical music sales.

2007: *Billboard* begins using digital streaming of music as a factor in its charts, though the publication cautions that the results will not be as dramatic as the previous move to account for non-physical sales.

2010: *Billboard* introduces its ranking of the “*Billboard* Social 50” to track musical artists on leading social networking sites from YouTube, Vevo, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and iLike.

2012: *Billboard* adds data from SoundCloud and Instagram to its Social 50 Chart.

2013: *Billboard* enhances its formula on its Hot 100 charts to better reflect the role of YouTube in music distribution and consumption.

2015: Data from Vine and Tumblr are included in the Social 50 Chart.

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