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My Bad Romance: Exploring the Queer Sublimity of Diva Reception

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My Bad Romance: Exploring the Queer Sublimity of Diva Reception

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, the late Ann Paxton, who is my favorite diva of all.
I would like to thank all of the men who shared their stories of diva fandom with me. I would also like to thank my committee members Carolyn Ellis and Elizabeth Bell for their guidance and encouraging words of support. My advisor, Dr. Stacy Holman Jones, deserves special thanks for helping me grow as a writer, scholar, and artist. Thank you for also allowing me to see that any research project is possible.
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the historic relationship between pop music divas and gay male fandom. It charts fan experiences from the early 60s with Judy Garland to contemporary times with pop diva Lady Gaga. This project also gives a description of the embodied experience of Brett Farmer’s “queer sublimity of diva reception.” Farmer (2005) argues that diva worship among gay men has become a queer sublimity, “the transcendence of a limiting heteronormative materiality and the sublime reconstruction, at least in fantasy, of a more capacious, kinder, queerer world” (p. 170). Using the methods of participant observation in drag performance and karaoke singing, performance ethnography, and autoethnography, I attempt to understand how a diva’s performance can influence the lives of gay men and how it can inspire visions of a more perfect world for everyone.
INTRODUCTION: DIVA IN TRAINING

What does it mean to be a diva? This question shows us the paradox of language and how one identity signifier can take on multiple and conflicted meanings. Adjectives associated with diva can range from the pleasurable (strong, fearless, powerful) to the unfavorable (arrogant, demanding, bitchy). Diva can be a term of endearment or an insult. It can be a performance of defense or confidence. It is a performance that creates a zone of contest and struggle (Conquergood, 1995) from which identities emerge as relational achievements (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). Performers leave the performance space with different identities (for the better, an achievement) than they originally possessed because of their interactions together in performance. Something occurs in the space that opens up questions surrounding identity and leading to potential change in one’s life.

Specifically in live musical performance, there are many components of “diva” that can make us question our very sense of self—from the musician’s performance on stage (voice, gestures, and movement) to the lyrics of her songs. Gender performance is something enacted continuously in the everyday. However, in a musical performance, the narratives of gender performance are dramatized, questioned, and sometimes, disrupted. Songs bring forth stories on the many complexities of life including love, lust, and loss. When a diva gets behind the microphone and performs, many potential questions can
emerge for spectators: How am I similar to her? How am I different? How are our personal histories similar or different? Why and how does she move me? What does her performance say about being a woman, man, feminine, masculine, gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered? What does her performance say about my position and the positions of others around me in the world? “Diva” creates a space that not only encourages us to ask questions about what is but also what could be in a fight for queer equality.

Even outside of live music, diva performance encourages the emergence of identities as relational achievements. When you perform “diva,” it is inspired by a performance of another “diva” in the past. Whether it was the performances of Judy, Liza, Babs, Bette, other divas, or a combination of diva performances, an individual diva performance in the everyday resulted from these former cultural experiences. Relationality is at play. The performer is transformed within this space in some way because of the interaction in performance with another. You may sing along to a music recording in the privacy of your home. You may perform for others in drag. This same type of “relational achievement” results had you been an audience member in a concert hall or theater because the presence of the musician, the diva remains— influencing and possibly improving your life. Of course, the question of who gets to perform diva is highly debated. Is this performance only reserved for women? My personal experience observing diva fandom among gay men seems to suggest otherwise.

And so, I believe a component of research on diva performance that requires more attention is how audiences (specifically gay men) use these performances in their lives. Similar to what Bochner and Ellis (2003) ask of art and narrative research, I would also like to ask, “To what uses could art [or diva performance] be put? What new
conversations would open for the viewer [or hearer]? What hidden possibilities could be unveiled? What dormant desires would be awakened?” (p. 507). Researchers can start asking questions such as how do diva performances teach? To whom? What stories do they evoke? Can they be considered performances of political intervention or social resistance?

Since coming out as a gay man, I have felt the profound effect of diva performances and fandom on a personal and community level. I’ve been shamed by gay men of previous generations for not knowing Judy Garland beyond the role of Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz* and her prominence in the cultural history of the Stonewall Riots. I have also been surprised that a love of diva performance is one that spans generations of gay men. I have found young gay men adoring more classical divas and older gay men adoring contemporary pop divas. These musical performers evoke memories from particular historical periods in the gay and lesbian movement while simultaneously creating new chapters in the movement’s narrative. They teach gay men that the line between masculine and feminine gender performance is very thin, and it’s okay (they are *encouraged*) to straddle the line. The diva’s performance has been a soundtrack for gay nightlife in dance clubs and concert halls throughout the world.

I have witnessed the ritual of social bonding between gay men that a diva’s performance and personae facilitates. I have watched gay men sing loudly together on a dance floor pumping their fists in solidarity to a diva anthem such as Katy Perry’s “Firework” or Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way.” Diva performance in the form of female musician encourages stories of alliance, social change, and gay activism. Diva performance in the form of a drag queen takes these potential stories a step further by
providing a script for scenes of gender bending and disidentifying performances. A disidentification is a performance that does not merely defy dominant ideologies of gender but works on and against dominant ideologies (Munoz, 1999). An example of this would be when I have observed my community scream with excitement as a drag queen takes the stage. We share an inside joke with her when we seductively slip a dollar bill between her breasts, enacting a disidentifying performance of heterosexist spectatorship. This project suggests that the relationship in performance between a gay man and a diva, whether a female musician or drag queen, strengthens the love and commitment between gay men in community and incites the gay man as an individual to seek change in his life.

For me, the diva’s performance has caused what I can only describe as an outer body experience. I watch the diva, and I take in the utopian performatives, which Dolan defines as “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present,” (p. 5). I can’t help but slip into the skin of the prima donna. As she floats across the stage, I feel myself in movement with her. I want to mirror every intense glare, rapid whipping of hair, and pronounced gesture. I want to feel the power of every note and musical trill as they explode from her gut, flow out of that sensuous mouth, and into the night air. I do not desire her or completely identify with her, but I want, I need her performance—in that very moment and in the mundane of the everyday.

When I exit the club doors, I take a piece of her with me. Every sassy finger snap, every “hey gurl, heyyyy!” I say, every step of confidence I take, every note I sing and opinion I express, every battle I fight, I owe in some way to the inspirational
performance of the diva. Divas and their performances mean something to me. They mean something to many in the gay community. They matter to us.

When I first began this project, I had some doubts. I identify as a feminist, and I wondered how feminist scholars would view this project. Would this be another example in which men used women for their own personal gain? After conversations with friends and colleagues in the Women’s Studies department on my campus, I came to the conclusion that this was not the case. In the relationships between gay men and divas, gendered forms of desire and norms are disrupted. The question becomes not what do gay men learn from divas who are women, but rather, what does it mean to be a diva, an identity construct and performance that blurs the line between masculine and feminine? As stated before, it is a term that embraces a paradigm of emergent identities as relational achievements in performance.

Because diva performance is not limited to one specific body or space, I wondered how this would affect my methodology. Would I conduct fieldwork at concerts? Would I observe drag performances in gay clubs? Would I watch music videos or movies? As a member of the gay community, I had many concerns about my position as the researcher. How much would I be involved in the research process? How much of my story would I share and how would I respectfully represent intimate others? Would I interview drag queens? I considered drag performance as a type of diva performance because many drag queens base their acts on female musicians and lessons of gender bending are even more apparent. Would I perform in drag and could it be something I actually wanted to do? How far could I push myself out of my comfort levels?
To begin answering these questions, I embraced living the ethnographic life (Rose, 1990). I realized that I am always an ethnographer, whether I am conscious of it or not, making meaning out of the cultural circumstances in which I am placed. I share sentiments with Goodall (2000) who argues that ethnographic fieldwork is less a formal method of inquiry than it is a disciplined attitude and conversational style that you learn to make into a way of life. I found myself observing (and participating) all kinds of diva performances ranging from drag performances at gay clubs, gay men singing karaoke in a bar, live and recorded performances of female musicians, and even those that occurred during a movie. I felt that diva performance was an evolving relationship with fans serving many purposes, and I wanted to discover as many of these purposes as possible. I wanted to find out how similar and different the diva experience was in varied performance spaces. For instance, I wondered if the benefits of diva performance were the same for a drag queen as a fan on the dance floor or in the concert hall. I felt that if a limited myself to a particular performance space or diva experience, I would shut myself off to potential stories and a richer analysis of the use of diva performances among gay men.

Therefore, I utilized several ethnographic research methods. I engaged in participant observation when I was a karaoke performer, drag queen, and gay fan. I implemented friendship as method (Tillmann-Healy, 2001) when I reached out to friends and asked them to tell me about their favorite divas and how they have impacted their lives. I used emotional recall (Ellis, 2004) to interrogate the specific meanings behind diva performance throughout my own life history. Finally, in order to speak with, and not for or about others and make my findings accessible to all types of audiences, I decided
to write a one-“diva” show based on my findings. Performance alone does not guarantee that this will happen. There must be a constant effort on the researcher’s part to make sure that the stories of others are being told ethically.

To be perfectly honest, at times I felt like I was caught up in one huge mess. Several questions ran through my mind: Would my friends appreciate the way I represented them? Would my show be entertaining and informative? Will the damn stage lights work? However, during times of major stress, I would step back and think about what a great mentor once taught me (C. Ellis, personal communication, January 2010). Dealing with human experience, emotions, and intimate others is a risky enterprise. Qualitative research (from realist to artistic approaches) is messy, but if you keep working and trust the process, you will get through the mess. I believe I did get through the mess, but instead of being covered in mud, I came out in a dress. I also believe an evocative account of the diva experience was produced. The following chapters outline the academic literature used as a foundation for my show, the script of the show, a description of the creative process for it, and the research findings I hope the show emphasizes.

In “Chapter 1: Diva Ethnography, Making the Analysis of Musical Performance Sing,” I provide a genealogy of performances studies scholarship relating to music performance, from Auslander’s (2004) call to include recorded music in analysis to more interpretive approaches to questions of how music performance impacts identity (Holman Jones, 2010; Kostenbaum, 1993; Kun, 2005; McRae, 2010). I propose diva ethnography as a methodology for the analysis of music performance, which incorporates multiple theoretical perspectives. I argue this will provide a more holistic approach, benefiting not
only specific academic communities but also those on the margins, specifically individuals who are discriminated against because of their gender identity or sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals).

In order to address some of the real-world implications of diva performance, I tackle the debate between structural feminists and postmodern feminists surrounding Butler’s (1999; 2004) theories on gender parody and subversive acts of gender in “Chapter 2: Exploring the Double Whammy of the Uncanny in Drag Performance.” I provide autoethnographic accounts from when I participated in and observed drag performances and the feelings these experiences evoked. Blending these experiences with Freud’s (1985) concept of the uncanny, I try to show how both structural and postmodern feminists do not work in opposition at their attempts to end gender inequality and violence. I also wish to highlight the importance of not collapsing sexual orientation, gender identity, and biological sex. This analysis will hopefully show that while all of these concepts are interconnected, each deserves consideration in academic scholarship. This chapter also highlights the possible feelings of the uncanny that were evoked in the audience of my performance and the potential impact of this evoking.

In “Chapter 3: My Bad Romance, Exploring the Queer Sublimity of Diva Reception,” I provide a script of my one diva show. This performance is based on fieldwork conducted at various music venues in the Tampa Bay area. These venues consisted of a gay karaoke bar, two gay dance clubs, and a gay resort that hosts concerts and drag performances. My show was performed on February 25, 2011, at the University of South Florida, and it was open to the public. Scenes range from monologues of my own personal experience, monologues of participants, and scenes of action from
fieldwork. This chapter gives a live representation of diva fandom as lived and performed by gay men. This show gives voice to my findings, and it makes them more accessible to all types of audiences by providing scenes that express the academic theory I wish to convey without being trapped by disciplinary jargon.

Finally, to provide more description on my findings and the artistic process of the show, “Chapter 4: What’s Love Got to Do With It?: Diva Performance as Evolving Relationship,” describes the patterns of expressions of diva fandom among gay men. It also shows how these expressions of fandom and the meaning behind the queer sublimity of diva reception can change across audiences. This analysis is derived from fieldwork conversations and a questionnaire distributed to the audience of my one-“diva” show. This chapter also describes the process for writing and producing the show and its potentially activist outcomes.

As I draw this introduction to a close, I want to prepare you for the material ahead. This is a work that promotes performance as a space of utopian and queer possibilities. It is a work filled with just as much emotional intensity as academic theorizing. It is a work yearning to be read. It is a project that contains several stories waiting to be told and songs to be sung. It is an artistic archive of tales filled with humor and pain. It encourages scandalous confessions of diva love and devotion. It is the perfect guide for the diva-in-training. Enjoy the journey.
Divas and Gay Politics: From Garland to Gaga

“Obama. I know that you are listening. Are you listening?”

Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, more prominently known as pop music diva Lady Gaga, yelled this to a crowd of gay activists at Washington D.C.’s National March for Equality on October 11, 2009 (Zak, 2009). Known for her eccentric and provocative performances, Gaga has been a strong advocate for gay rights. This speech solidified how dedicated she was to her gay fans.

On that exciting day, Gaga exclaimed, “I have seen and witnessed so many things over the past two years, and I can say with such certainty that this is the single most important moment of my career. I am humbled to stand before all of you today. I know that some of you have been fighting and doing advocacy work that stems all the way back to the Stonewall Riots. I salute you.” She smiled and continued, “And you know, I love Judy Garland.” Gaga then acknowledged “her generation” of advocates and implored them to keep the movement going.

Gaga drew connections between her gay fan base and Garland’s to signify that the fight for equality is not over. What is even more interesting about this connection is that after more than 40 years since the Stonewall Riots, there is still a political relationship
between large gay fan bases and female music divas. The diva’s performance does not just heal gay spectators in times of turmoil, but it promotes action. While the LGBTQ community has progressed since the Stonewall Riots, there is still much work to be done in a fight for equality. Judy’s death sparked a movement, and her voice and the voice of many divas are constant reminders of the work ahead.

But what exactly, do these performances mean and embody for gay men? I argue that in order to understand the political significance of these performances, scholars must incorporate a methodology which determines what diva performance “awakens or evokes in the spectators [gay men], how it creates meanings, how it can heal, and what it can teach, incite, inspire, or provoke” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p. 507). As Bochner & Ellis suggest, interpretive researchers can ask: “To what uses could art [or music] be put? What new conversations would open for the viewer [or hearer]? What hidden possibilities would be unveiled? What dormant desires would be awakened?” (p. 507). Diva performance is “something to be used; not a conclusion but a turn in a conversation; not a closed statement, but an open question; not a way of declaring ‘this is how it is’ but a means of inviting others to consider what I (or they) could become” (p.507). Diva ethnography provides a method for scholarship that explores the cultural meanings behind performances as texts while also acknowledging the fully embodied experience of live performances and what they bring to everyday life.

In this chapter, I give a brief historical timeline on some of the prominent music divas in the gay community. I then explain Farmer’s “queer sublimity of diva reception” and how diva ethnography can provide a richer analysis of his theory. I conclude with a discussion of current autothenographic work addressing music fandom and what the
future of _diva ethnography_ can bring to the analysis of musical performance and specific marginalized communities.

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**Gay Men and Music Divas: A Historical Love Affair?**

The word “diva” is defined in Webster’s dictionary as “1. Primma donna. 2. A usually glamorous and successful female performer or personality <a fashion diva> especially a popular female singer <pop divas>” (merriam-webster.com). The etymology of diva dates to the beginnings of opera, where a primma donna was known as the principal singer in an opera. In contemporary popular culture, the title of diva now applies to all types of performers including musicians, comedienne s, and actresses. The term is also used in everyday discourse, taking on both negative and positive connotations. Due to its contested meaning, diva can be a compliment or insult depending on the context of the situation. The term diva is not only being applied to gay and straight women, but also to gay and straight men. However, there are different theories on how diva began as a signifier of gay male culture and the implications of diva performance for the liberation of gay men.

Kostenbaum (1993) draws connections between gay men and the original roots of “diva” in opera. He describes in great detail the gay male “opera queens” who regularly attend the opera to see their divas. Some will meticulously collect every released recording of their favorite female opera singers, creating shrines in their homes. They are fascinated by every intricate detail of an opera diva’s life. “I crave backstage knowledge about divas,” Kostenbaum writes, “Coming of age in a civilization of the closet, I have wanted to know how divas debut and bomb and blitz and survive and fail and dream and
die…I’m affirmed and divined—made porous, open, awake, glistening—by a diva’s sentences of self-defense and self-creation” (p. 84). Gay men feel that they have something to learn from the life of the diva. Women and gay men face similar struggles within systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

In addition, divas and gay men are both often seen as unnatural, going against laws of “natural” order where masculinity is privileged over femininity, and where hyper feminized personalities are disciplined. A gay man may find that if an idolized diva can face particular battles and still survive in this world, so can he survive. If the diva is accepted and adored because of her over the top, out of the “ordinary,” hyper-feminized behavior, maybe the gay man can be as well.

Konstenbaum continues, “The diva overturns the world’s gendered ground by making femaleness seem at once powerful and artificial” (p. 104). Divas become famous often after enduring a treacherous past, but like gay men, they are still demonized or considered unnatural by some individuals. They “come out” from behind the curtain and are adored by fans. In a world dominated by patriarchy and heteronormativity, divas and gay men both find themselves fighting against oppressive regimes. Both find strength in musical performance to help them narrate their lives against and around canonical narratives. The lyrics and notes of a song can tell a story of strength and perseverance. The diva’s performance and the gay fan’s engagement with this song activate the story and make it a reality.

For instance, scholars (Duberman, 1994; Kaiser, 1997; Miller, 1995) have argued that Judy Garland served as one of the first examples of a diva that had cultural significance for gay men. Dyer (1986) describes her camp appeal, defining camp as “a
characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable” (p. 176). Bone (2003) argues that Garland, recognizing this appeal among gay fans, once said, “When I die I have visions of fags singing ‘Over the Rainbow’ and the flag at Fire Island being flown at half mast” (p. 1). During concert performances Garland often exaggerated the passive meanings constructed around femininity, the woman needing to be saved or fulfilled by a man. She parodied the damsel in distress with her enfantilized voice and innocently childlike stage presence.

Gross (2000) gives a description of what Garland called her “Little Tramp” outfit (androgynous hobo attire) she wore during finales of her music concerts. He describes in one instance some of the dynamics of this performance personae. He writes:

There is one surviving film of her performing the song [“Somewhere Over the Rainbow”] this way—one long extreme close-up, in which the coal smudges on her chin and cheeks draw attention to the black pools of her eyes, focused on infinity. In her short black wig with messy bangs, she looks like a little boy who has been playing in the dirt on a windy day. Sometimes on the rest between notes her lips shape the coming lyric, as if the words were fighting their way out of her. At one moment she smiles as if she sees something so beautiful that she cannot contain her delight; at the next she shakes with an innocent anger, as if she knows that her longing will never lead to the freedom she imagines with such devastating clarity. (p. 69)

Gross argues that many spectators felt that Garland was singing directly to them. Gay men know all about role-playing, and he states that there was some kind of comfort in seeing Garland’s emotional struggle of identity on stage. Gross (2000) argues that the gay men who believed in her, “who believed despite her failures that her sincerity and her joy were real, this act of faith cannot have been unrelated to the project of believing in themselves-even if the selves they believed in were selves they had to make up” (p. 69).
Garland embodied many of the conflicting feelings gay men experienced when coming out, including vulnerability and strength, sincerity and duplicity, self-consciousness and abandon, adolescence and maturity.

A few historians have argued that Garland’s death, a week before the Stonewall Riots of 1969, was what fueled some of the anger among the protestors (Duberman, 1994; Kaiser, 1997; Miller, 1995). Regardless of the truth of this Garland/Stonewall connection, it has been prominent in the recounting of the historical event. In his film Stonewall, Nigel Finch shows lead character Bostonia mourning over Garland’s televised funeral and later during the raid refusing to turn off a Garland song on the juke box, proclaiming, “Judy stays.”

However, Gross (2000) argues Garland’s status as a positive icon is now contested among gay men. He states that gay culture in the 1960s was blatantly effeminate, white, urban, and middle class. After the Stonewall Riots, gay stereotypes went “butch.” Hyper-masculine men adorning Levis and work boots became symbols for gay identity. Currently, Gross writes, “We have fetishized a flamboyant normalcy, exemplified by the frat-boy chic of Bruce Weber’s slyly homoerotic ad campaigns for Abercrombie and Fitch. Young gay men just want to be average guys with better-than-average bodies” (p. 64). This shift in gay culture has also caused a backlash against those who worshipped Judy, similar to Kostenbaum’s “opera queens.” Harris (1999) argues that these individuals are “sniffling queens” who use Garland’s performances as a way to wallow in self-pity. Harris seems to suggest that therapeutic engagement with diva performance is reduced to a sign of weakness and perpetuation of gay stereotypes.
Amidst the struggle between masculine and feminine symbols of gay culture, the "opera queen" and his relationship with the diva has continued to exist post Stonewall. There have been numerous divas that have some sort of connection to the gay community. Garland’s daughter, Liza Minnelli, also became a gay icon when she first gained popularity for her role as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* (Mair, 1996). She has been an avid supporter of the Foundation for AIDS research. In 1994, she recorded the song “The Day After That” and donated the proceeds to this foundation. In the same year, she also performed this song in New York Central Park on the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. In 2005, she received GLAAD’s Vanguard award for raising awareness on issues facing the LGBTQ community. In 2010, PFLAG awarded her the Straight for Equality in Entertainment honor. Minnelli has even had a recent cameo appearance in *Sex and the City 2*. She sings Beyonce’s “Single Ladies” at a gay wedding. The punch line comes when one character remarks, “If the occasion gets gay enough, she just appears.”

In addition, diva Barbra Streisand is known as a gay icon. She started her career in 1960 at the Lion, a popular gay club in New York’s Greenwich Village. It was during this time she decided to make a particularly diva-like move to change the spelling of her name from the traditional Barbara to Barbra. She told a reporter at CBS news, “Well, I was 18 and I wanted to be unique, but I didn't want to change my name because that was too false. You know, people were saying you could be Joanie Sands, or something like that. [My middle name is Joan.] And I said, 'No, let's see, if I take out the 'a,' it's still 'Barbara,' but it's unique” (Morgan, 2010). She has produced 35 studio albums and has had a number one album for five consecutive decades. Streisand is known for her popular hits “Evergreen,” “The Way We Were,” and her duet with Donna Summers “No More
Tears.” Streisand also performed with Garland on *The Judy Garland Show* (Andersen, 2006). As a supporter of the Democratic Party, Streisand strongly promotes queer equality.

Of course, I cannot forget Bette Midler and Cher. While Cher started her career with partner Sonny Bono. Her son Chaz (born Chasity) Bono came out as a lesbian at the age of 17. Cher’s performance as a lesbian in the 1983 film *Silkwood*, her guest appearances in the 90s gay themed sitcom *Will and Grace*, and her more recent LGBTQ activist work (including support for Chaz’s sexual reassignment surgery) have all contributed to her status as a gay icon (Smith, 2010). In the 1970s, Bette Midler sang in Continental Baths, a gay bathhouse in New York. This is where she met close friend Barry Manilow who produced her 1972 album *The Divine Miss M* (Mair, 1995; Bego, 2002). She took the nickname Bathhouse Betty and this later became the title of one of her albums. In a television interview Midler described herself as “trash with flash—I am a combination of Streisand, Janis Joplin, and Judy Garland. The more outrageous I am, the more they love me [men at the bathhouse]. They love my flamboyance and hyper-emotionalism” (*Bette Midler and the Bathhouse Documentary*).

In the 1980s and 1990s, while not as directly tied to the gay community, Madonna appeared on the scene. While still exuding this “hyper-emotionalism,” her performances at times could be more political. Madonna, dubbed by Fiske (1987) as the postmodern heroine, was known for her constantly changing musical personae. Fiske argued that this symbolized a break from foundational, concrete conceptualizations of one’s identity and embracing an identity that is constantly in flux. Madonna made being “different” something to be celebrated. She, intentionally or unintentionally, expanded the diva
performance space from one of solely emotional reverie to include political protest. This can be seen through her overt displays of sexuality and queer interpretations of dominant institutions (such as the Catholic church). More contemporary divas such as Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, and Rihanna emulate this type of diva performance. While a strong fan base among gay men still persists, these performances seem to attract large queer fan bases overall.

Currently, this observation of divas and queer fandom is most apparent with musician Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta known as Lady Gaga. She calls herself “Mother Monster” and refers to her fans as her “little monsters.” Her performances and music promote messages of self-acceptance, embracing your “inner freak,” and the empowerment of the social outcast. She has made her position as an LGBTQ activist known by speaking out against gender inequality during her concerts and at public events. During the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, she wore a dress made of meat to push for the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (Oldenburg, 2010). While discussing this choice of attire with talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, she said, “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 own bones. And, I am not a piece of meat” (Oldenberg, usatoday.com).

Indeed, the gender identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation of Gaga herself have been topics of great debate among the press. She has had to fight rumors surfacing on the Internet of her being a man. Kostenbaum (1993) argues some famous opera singers also had to fight similar rumors. In a 2009 interview with Barbara Walters, Gaga discussed her sexual orientation. Walters referenced one of the lyrics from Gaga’s hit
song “Pokerface” in which she states that she is “bluffin’ with her muffin.” When Walters asked, “Are you bisexual?” Gaga responded that she had sexual relationships with men and women but has only been in love with men.

In fact, many of her songs speak to those who feel like outcasts in society (sometimes specifically the LGBTQ community). “Poker Face” is only one example. Many gay men enjoy “Boys, Boys, Boys” which is a spin on Motley Crue’s “Girls, Girls, Girls.” I believe two most recent hits, “Born this Way” and “Judas,” also speak to those who may feel ostracized. “Born this Way” (an analysis of the song provided later) promotes the message that you should love who you are regardless of sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or race. In “Judas,” Gaga’s character states that she is in love with Judas, the man who, according to biblical scripture, caused the crucifixion of Christ. Some may argue that this is a strategy to criticize some forms of Christianity. However, Gaga says that the song is about forgiving others and most importantly, forgiving one’s self (Germonotta, live concert, April 2011). It appears that Gaga (“Mother Monster”) through her performances has created a place of refuge and resistance for not only gay men but also all individuals who identify as queer.

Farmer’s Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship

What can one make of all this? Through textual analysis, we could explore a particular performer’s significance in time and what meanings can be read from her performance as a text. What about how these performances affect audience members individually, on a more personal level and their commitments to one another within a particular marginalized community? One cannot find out how these performances are used just by textual analysis, but by going out in the arena of these particular
performances, interviewing spectators, and questioning the feelings they arouse and uses they create in the researcher. What does this “hyper-emotionalism” mean to gay men now? What feelings are evoked from the diva’s “good to be bad” performances? Does her performance encourage political action? To consider these questions, one must directly speak with the gay spectators of these performances. Farmer (2000) writes:

I argue that the cultural, historical, and psychic frameworks of gay subjectivity furnish gay-identifying spectators with certain positions and references that fundamentally inflect their cinematic engagements. In particular, the psychocultural specificities of gay subjectivity motivate gay spectators to forge distinctive investments in and readings of cinematic texts. In short, I argue that gay identification functions as a ‘difference that makes a difference’ in filmic reception, and it is possible, therefore, to speak of gay spectatorship as a specific-if inevitably complex and contingent-configuration of cinematic meaning production and exchange. (p. 6)

Farmer shows the importance of considering gay spectatorship in the analysis of diva performance. There is a specific gay culture in America composed of various social roles and rituals. Farmer is not arguing that sexual orientation, as a biologically determined factor, will alter cinematic reception. Rather, he is saying that, regardless of the stance taken on homosexuality (biology or choice), we can argue that a homosexual orientation places individuals in a specific culture—a way of life with profound differences than those with a heterosexual orientation. This, in turn, affects the way in which these individuals receive and critique cinematic images (or in this case, diva performances). With this paradigm of spectatorship, one cannot only decipher meanings from a text but how the text is used personally and politically in a marginalized community.

In fact, Farmer (2005) has explored what he coins the “fabulous sublimity of gay diva worship” through the reading of a scene in the 1993 film Philadelphia. Farmer argues that diva worship among gay men has become a queer sublimity, “the
transcendence of a limiting heteronormative materiality and the sublime reconstruction, at least in fantasy, of a more capacious, kinder, queerer world” (p. 170). The scene of a gay man worshiping a diva ruptures notions of an essential, stable male homosexuality. In the movie, Tom Hanks’s character Andy is fired from his law firm because he is HIV positive. He is discussing his legal case with his lawyer (played by Denzel Washington). In the middle of the discussion, Andy begins to play Maria Callas’s “La Mamma Morta.” He is engulfed by the song. Andy closes his eyes, sways back and forth, and silently whispers the lyrics in English translation. Commenting on the scene, Farmer argues:

His ferociously loving estrangement with the diva produces for Andy not just an overwhelming transport of feeling, but also a delirious transcendence of embodied identity itself. Moving blithely across the multiple positions of the diva’s fluid performativity, Andy enacts what Dennis Allen terms an ‘osmosis of the self,’ a rupturing of the boundaries that frame and constitute identity and a radical dispersal of the self across the differential field of alterity. (p. 177)

Farmer argues that a scene of gay diva worship breaches multiple dichotomies—male/female, hetero/homo, self/other, and identification/desire. He writes, “Through the perverse practices, the aberrant cathexes and desires of diva worship, gay cultures have fashioned a unique and insistently affirmative cultural space within which to produce and experience shifting and multiple forms of queer subjecthood” (p. 184). These scenes of the sublime that depict the simultaneous and paradoxical pairing of “subjective fracture” and “subjective restoration,” a “homosexuality run amok,” “reparative gay labor,” and a projection of a queer utopia are scenes of the “queer sublimity of diva reception.”

From Farmer’s analysis, we learn that diva performance can be therapeutic for a gay man and it can give him hope for a better future. This queer sublimity of diva reception is reminiscent of Dolan’s concept of the utopian performative. Dolan writes:
Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense...in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better. (p. 5-6)

Dolan argues that the emphasis on present time in performance “lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater” (p. 17). When a closeted gay man watches a diva on stage, his admiration of her self-acceptance and strength may be an inspiration to come out. Her performance provides a temporary utopia that aids him in being able to release constraints or worries in his life. This performance space allows him to see what could be. Gay men who are already out may watch a diva performance and celebrate their self-acceptance or become inspired to continue to loudly fight against the current systems that oppress them.

In the beginning of this piece, Farmer brings in a personal account of his experiences with diva worship. At the age of 10, his elementary school teacher asked the class to write about their hero. Farmer chose actress and singer Julie Andrews. He writes, “It was this profession of ardent admiration for a female film star that led directly to my school yard outing. As my accuser put it when explicating the deductive rationale behind his sexual detection, ‘Only a homo would love Julie Andrews!’” (p. 166). Farmer draws connections between interpretations of his love of Andrews with character Andy’s love of Callas in the film. He not only acknowledges the activist potential of a scene of gay diva worship (breaking hetero/homo binary of desire), and how this poses a threat to homophobic individuals, but he also acknowledges the therapeutic aspects of her performances.
Farmer (2005) writes, “On long, listless afternoons, returned home from school, I would rush to the living room, position myself squarely in front of the family hi-fi and blissfully listen my way through my expansive collection of Julie Andrews LPs” (p. 168). He continues to discuss how he would wait in breathless anticipation for the disc of the Sound of Music soundtrack to “crackle to life.” Farmer would listen to her music for hours and embody Andrews’s characters. Farmer recounts:

Projecting myself into the scene, I would twirl with Julie in imaginary freedom, riding the crest of her crystalline voice in rapturous transport from the suburban mundanities of family, school, and straightness. Invested with the attentive love and astonishing creativity of juvenile fandom, Andrews provided not just the promissory vision of a life different from and infinitely freer than the one I knew but the phantasmatic means through which to achieve and sustain this process of transcendence. If I adored Julie Andrews as a child, it was because that adoration functioned as a process through which to resist and transfigure the oppressive banalities of the heteronormative everyday. (p. 169)

Blending personal testimony and textual analysis, Farmer brings forth a compelling analysis to support his argument for the queer sublimity of diva reception. He gives readers not only a description of the phenomena visually but also viscerally through his own experience with Andrews’s musical performances. This is parallel to Kostenbaum’s description of opera queens, where the engagement a performance is not just a simple pleasure or form of entertainment. It takes the listener on a journey to a place outside of the status quo. The diva performance is a coveted experience that is not devoured ravenously but savored. It is a performance that brings comfort but also provokes questions about identity. The political potential of a diva’s performance is rendered through a personal interrogation of self.
Autoethnography: Giving Voice to the Analysis of Musical Performance

In the field of Communication, scholars are incorporating autoethnographic methods in the analysis of cultural texts in order to understand how performances provoke these questions on identity. In an analysis of reality television, Boylorn (2008) provides a layered account (Ronai, 1995) of representations of African American women. She combines an autoethnographic gaze with an oppositional gaze and she encourages black women to look “(inward at their own lives and outward at the images and depictions of Black womanhood that are currently available on reality television) to oppose and challenge rather than immediately and readily accept negative representations of black womanhood” (p. 414). Gay men can use the same approach when watching diva performance. When he watches a certain performer, he can look inward to discover common struggles, hopes for the future, and life histories. He can then look outward at the goddess before him and learn from her.

Among the potential lessons he can learn from the diva are strength in the midst of adversity, self-acceptance, embracing individuality, and to revel in your own sexual vitality. The diva’s performance can become a narrative of power that the man does not just take in but allows to “live with him” day to day (Frank, 1995). He too might enact the performance of diva in his everyday life. The stories of her live performance remain with him bringing encouragement and strength. Her recordings are constant reminders of her message that the gay man can revisit at any time.

We cannot ignore the implications of recorded music on identity. The mere sound of the diva’s voice can be just as powerful as her stage presence (Kostenbaum, 1993). Auslander (2004) argues that performance scholars are neglecting musical performance
as an object of analysis. He writes, “I cannot explain fully the neglect of musical performance by performance studies, but I suspect that a partial explanation lies in the genealogy of the field” (p. 1). Musicologists are primarily concerned with musical composition, rather than the musical performer. The performer is seen as a means to an end, a tool for the music to pass through for audience reception. Cultural studies scholars are usually not interested in what a performer is doing on stage. Their concerns are “the sociological, institutional, and policy contexts in which popular music is made, not the immediate context of the work of the artists who make it” (p.3). Here lies what Auslander describes as the disciplinary dilemma of musical performance scholarship. He believes that those scholars whose priority is performance are hesitant to include music in analysis. He also believes those scholars that consider music as an art or cultural form find the analysis of the performance of music unnecessary.

Therefore, Auslander discusses how scholars can bridge the dividing line between the study of music and the study of performance by “encouraging close readings of performances by popular musicians, readings that attend to the particulars of physical movement, gesture, and facial expression as much as voice and musical sound” (p.3). When analyzing a performer, Auslander suggests looking at three layers of their performance: the real person, the performance persona, and the character. The real person refers to the performer’s “true” self. The performance persona refers to how the performer markets herself or himself to an audience. Finally, the character refers to the performer’s self in the lyrics of the song, or the protagonist of the song’s narrative. By using his framework, I can explore how the multiple dimensions of a diva’s performance influence gay men.
In fact, I can begin to ask questions like: How does a diva’s performance encourage utopias outside of the theater or concert hall and into private spaces? How is this sense of utopia different in private spaces? Kun (2005) addresses this with his theory of audiotopia. He argues that even when individuals just listen to music they can find themselves in a utopia. All of their worries or fears diminish for a few moments in time. He writes:

How could you not talk of identity when talking about music? When you hear it, music makes you immediately conscious of your identity precisely because something outside of you is entering your body- alien sounds emitted from strangers you sometimes cannot see that enter, via vibration and frequency, the very bones and tissues of your being. All musical listening is a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meanings, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore, menaced through its own interrogation. (p.13)

While a spectator may enjoy diva performance, the sublime can be jolting. A powerful female’s voice enters the gay man’s body. In this encounter or confrontation, there is a possibility that the story of her desires, fears, and struggles meets his. In the ecstasy of the moment, he interrogates the similarities and differences of the stories and tries to learn from this interrogation. He wants to listen and learn in order to change his life—to change the life of others. Any performance that makes someone question their very existence and their sense of self could be “menacing” but in potentially powerful and beautiful ways. A diva’s particular musical recording can have just as much, if not different, meaning for a gay man as her live performance. It is important that I study all dimensions of a diva’s performance to discover the many different ways in which she can inspire her gay audiences and how these relationships between performers, music, and fans can evolve over time.

In his discussion on Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” McRae argues, “The
importance of this song is constantly changing as it weaves in and out of my own story. The meaning of this song like any relationship has changed and taken on various meanings for me over time and in different contexts” (p. 326). He traces his first experiences listening to the song as a memory of time shared with his mother as a boy. Then, as a college student, the song provided a space for him to mourn after a breakup. Finally, he engages with the song by singing it in a professional band. The song becomes an anthem for parts of his life narrative, taking on different meanings at different points in time.

While he supports Auslander’s (2004) call to consider recorded music in the analysis of music performance, he wants to expand this argument. He argues, “For Auslander, the performers (real people) perform their image (star persona) as performers and perform the character of the song. However, I argue that this analysis does not adequately consider the role and impact of the audience in this performance of identities” (p. 2). There is an interconnected relationship between a performer (real person, personae, and character), a song, and the audience. By incorporating all of these aspects in the study of musical performance, McRae argues scholars can provide a richer analysis. I can see how the diva as person, personae, and character can inspire political action in the gay community.

McRae also argues, “My interpretation of the song will change, but the song also evolves and this evolution shapes my interpretations” (p. 327). He discusses how Gloria Gaynor, after having an increase in religious faith, changed a lyric of the song. This then could potentially change its interpretation among audience members. The song was recorded by Cake, providing a male vocal part and the possibility of a male protagonist in
the lyrics. McRae writes, “It is in this version that I first realize how unfixed gender is for all the possible characters in the narrative of the lyrics. This is a song of survival in all relationships, romantic, not romantic, homosexual, heterosexual” (p. 327). Changing lyrics, providing alternative vocal parts, mash ups with other songs, multiple performers, are all aspects of the evolution of a song. Therefore, the audience member’s life experiences and the evolution of the song itself can work together in complex ways encouraging multiple interpretations of identity and historical events.

Furthermore, Holman Jones (2010a) writes, “In the space of a song a performer and her performance can create such a hopeful, radical space” (p.268). Her work on torch singers (Edith Piaf, Billie Holiday, and Barbra Streisand among others) explores how audience members can learn resistive performances from a music artist. She studies torch singers because “they perform narrative double bind in which the person/singer/character in the song are lashed to a genre, an industry, and world in which there is no possible mode of escape, not for a girl singer. And yet, and yet, she manages to sing her confinement until it-she-we come undone” (2010b, p.284). Torch songs narrate the story of a woman experiencing unrequited love. Holman Jones specifically addresses Billie Holiday’s torch performance of “My Man.” Holiday sings, “Oh my man I love him so… I don’t know why I should. He isn’t good. He isn’t true. He beats me too, what can I do?” (Williametz & Charles, 1996, p. 114). Holiday’s performance persona is a female victim of domestic abuse in a heterosexual relationship.

However, Holiday’s life story (the person) does not necessarily match the narratives within her torch songs. Holman Jones (2010b) argues that there is a “confessional” assumption about torch singing, that “a singer can tell the truth about herself and further,
that there is an essential stable ‘Billie’ [or other torch singers] to be narrated and preserved in the music” (p.285). Holiday thwarts this assumption. She is “an unreliable narrator. Her story is a series of contradictory accounts, carefully constructed smokescreens, and outright lies” (p. 285). Holiday, like other torch singers “create-perform a storied life in which the lines demarcating the ‘real’ person from the star persona from the character in the song are often blurry and indistinct, complex and ambiguous” (p. 285). These types of performances celebrate an “uncertain space between autobiography and a created, fictional I.” This space is made uncertain through an analysis of her performativity—the language she uses and her non-verbal actions of a performance that potentially intervene in human events.

This space of performativity challenges the status quo (specifically for women in relationships), but also allows audience members to imagine what could be. Performativity unveils how selves are not static but constantly changing through performance. Torch singers show us the possibility of the creation of new and emergent selves through performance. These women show us that a space of performance is a space of the “trickster” (Conquergood, 1995). Performance (whether on the stage of a concert hall or the stage everyday life) allows individuals to keep audience members guessing, making cracks in dominant ideologies of identity while also envisioning the potential of their shattering.

In addition, Holman Jones encourages us to consider how these performances can promote reflection on our own life stories and performative selves. She argues:

Not entirely a celebration of the independent woman or the epitome of the torch song’s forlorn victim, Holiday’s performances voice the many silent, yet irresistible, knowledges and desires that dare not speak their names. Her singing is not simply or merely a performance, an error in judgment, or a failure of
constitution, but the realization of a life’s work. And this life—hers, mine, and ours—
can be full of multiple and contradictory personae, unfinished and uncertain, and
full of surprises and possibilities. Just ask. (p. 288)

When a gay man watches a diva, he is not just watching a performance. He is listening to
a possible story of struggle or celebration. It is a story coming from the performer as
character, personae, and person. She reminds the gay man that he is a shape shifter, and
just as her identity changes and emerges in the space of music, so can our identities in the
space of everyday performance. Through our relationships with others, we come to know
our multiple selves better. Identity becomes a relational achievement created in
performance. One story, one note, or one touch can ignite questions about whom one
really is, and these questions may or may never be answered. The diva encourages us to
enjoy this uncertainty through dance and song in her reigning performance space.

The Future of Diva Ethnography

Musical performances are not “just” entertainment. They can be political and life
changing. These performances not only encourage us to question the false notion of an
essential identity, but they also encourage us to fight in a world full of injustice. They
promote conversations and confessions of contested lives and spaces of beautifully burnt
voices.

Furthermore, the resistive possibilities of torch singers and pop divas have
similarities and differences. Both show how dominant ideologies of gender, race, and
class can be challenged in performance and how performance creates a space for fluid
and emergent identities. The torch singer’s resistance is powerful, elegantly seductive,
and subtle. The pop diva’s resistance is loud, intense, and overtly sexual. However,
interpretations of both provide tools for gay men to combat hegemonic constructions of
masculinity and homophobia. It is important that all resistive possibilities of these musical performances are considered because some situations of protest call for forms of subtle activism, while others call for more radical forms of activism. Some forms of activism are radical in their subtlety.

Therefore, I propose that researchers employ *diva ethnography* to understand the activist potential of the diva’s musical performance. If we want to know how these performances are not only received but also used by audiences, we must utilize as many scholarly perspectives as possible. *Diva ethnography* calls for textual and performance analysis in order to understand the political economy of the music industry and how this effects the artist’s performance and audience reception. It calls for auto-ethnographic perspectives in order to understand what the musical performance evokes in the researcher and his or her interaction with others. These methods also provide a space for commentary on the performance from a marginalized voice and how it helps story a life.

Also, *Diva ethnography* encourages a performance-centered perspective of music in order to understand how the context of the live and recorded performance (location, genre, historical period, staging, etc) affects audience use and reception. Holman Jones (2010a) writes, “Performance matters. Performance is a materializing *movement* of voices and bodies, players and listeners, sounds and texts, structures and stories” (p. 268). Finally, *diva ethnography* promotes the performance of the actual research because as Spry (2001) writes, “Performing autoethnography has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon myself as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate, and embrace” (p. 708). Performing research frees the scholar from some of the constraints of the academic voice (Spry,
2001), and allows audiences to see and feel the “living, experiencing, and researching body” (p. 720). This also adds to a work’s activist component, making it more accessible to the general public.

In summary, *diva ethnography* provides a method that attempts to holistically analyze musical performance. Some individuals may argue that the incorporation of so many perspectives and methods will harm the analysis. It will appear too fragmented or spread too thin. However, people say the diva’s performance is bold, ground breaking, and over the top, and it resists particular structures of music genre. The communication or performance studies scholar can also be “over the top” and resist particular structures of “traditional” methods or paradigms of research. In order to understand how particular music performances can aid marginalized communities, we must look at all of their components (performer, audience, song lyrics, music genre and industry, etc). If this is too much for one researcher, collaboration with others is possible. A music concert is not complete without all of its parts (singer, musicians, stage technicians, etc.) just as the analysis of musical performance is not complete without the incorporation of all scholarly perspectives. If you decide to embark upon the journey of musical performance analysis, be a diva researcher. Your academic community and, more important, those on the margins need you.
CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORING THE DOUBLE WHAMMY OF THE UNCANNY IN DRAG PERFORMANCE

“Please stop staring! Yes, it’s Cher,” says Jack McFarland as he points to his miniature Cher doll sitting in a booster seat.

In the following scene from the hit 90’s television sitcom Will and Grace, Jack is in a restaurant with friends Will Truman and Grace Adler. Their server looks perplexed as he watches Jack treat the doll like an actual human being.

“Okay, that’s it!” Will complains. He motions to the server. “Nothing for us. We’re out of here! Jack—this Cher thing is out of control!”

“What is the problem?” Jack asks.

As Will hastily snatches up his coat from the table, he exclaims, “You made us wait for a table of four!”

“In the back...so she wouldn’t be gawked at!” Grace says.

“Bye bye!” Will yells, and Grace quickly adds, “Freak!”

“You’re the freaks!” Jack retorts as they walk past him and out the restaurant.

The “real” Cher walks up to Jack. “You know, it is kind of weird that you are talking to my doll,” she says.

Jack responds, “Um, I don’t think I need a drag queen to help me define normal behavior.” He is oblivious to the fact that he is talking to the real Cher. In the
remainder of the scene, he instructs this supposed impersonator on how to be more like Cher. He tells her how to flip her hair and speak like Cher.

“‘It’s not ‘So you think so?’ It’s ‘So you think sooooooow.’” He corrects her as he does a hair flip.

After this quick instruction, Cher shakes her head. She pats him on the back and says, “Dude. Get a life.”

She begins to walk out of the restaurant, but stops. In one final attempt to convince Jack that she is actually Cher, she sings, “If I could turn back time!”

Jack corrects her again. “No, no, no. It’s if I could turn back TAAAAHMEH, TAAAAHMEH, TAAAAHMEH!”

Cher responds by swiftly slapping him across the face and saying, “Snap out of it!”

As she walks away, Jack slowly touches his face and faints to the floor.

This humorous scene represents the cult obsession of the music diva among large gay male audiences. One cannot help but feel resonance with Freud’s (1919) concept of the uncanny, which he argues, “belongs to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread” (p. 1, emphasis mine). The uncanny has been associated with many creations of fiction—supernatural creatures, the living dead, and telepathy. It has also been connected with a fear of losing one’s eyes, which Freud directly relates to a fear of castration. He provides a thorough exploration of the feeling of the uncanny through tracing its etymology to the German root *Heimlich*, providing
textual analysis of literary and film representations, and describing it in the instances of everyday life. By the end of his piece, we do not have a complete definition of the uncanny. However, Freud reaches some consensus by arguing that the uncanny represents all that has strange familiarity or that is strangely familiar. The uncanny is a feeling that occurs when there is an unveiling of something that should have remained hidden but is brought to light—bringing out all thoughts or emotions that may have been previously repressed.

What is so strangely familiar or familiarly strange about Cher’s appearance for Jack? Freud would argue that it has something to do with Jack’s repressed desires expressed through his private engagement with Cher’s musical performances. Cher is a performer that Jack knows intimately. This woman is so familiar to him he can emulate her every gesture and voice and exaggerate them and do them better than the “original.” He idolizes her for various potential reasons. Maybe he wants her confidence. Maybe he wants to be able to express femininity freely. Maybe he wants fame—to be adored by all. The idea of ever meeting her in person seems impossible, a fantasy. It would be an out-of-the ordinary experience—something strange. Jack craves Cher’s presence so much that he crafts a doll image. The doll not only symbolizes the need for an actual relationship with Cher, but potentially all desires that Jack may have repressed through his life only to be freely expressed through private engagement with her performances.

Cher is so mystical, so supernatural to Jack that he does not even realize her presence when they come face to face. And then the moment of recognition occurs. Freud (1919) writes, “An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes
over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes” (p. 15). When Cher recites a famous line from *Moonstruck* and slaps him, Jack comes into contact with not only her performance but with part of her physical reality. An entity from the realm of fantasy enters the everyday. This is delightfully frightening. Jack realizes that his desires to have Cher in his life and to live freely in the world as a gay man, symbolized through the doll, can be satisfied. He feels the force of the uncanny. He is undone.

What is to be said of his undoing? Why is Jack so unsettled by Cher’s presence? Of course, one could argue simply that her status as a celebrity and his extreme adoration for her causes him to fall into a state of shock. This may be true, but there lies a deeper reason for this unsettling, for his undoing, for the uncanny. And, while audiences may laugh at this humorous scene, do they too feel some sense of strange familiarity? Does this form of extreme gay fandom unsettle them and if so in what ways? Can provoking feelings of the uncanny in others ultimately be a political act?

Freud (1919) writes, “Aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling” (p. 1). He argues that while most psychoanalysts work in “other planes of mental life,” the study of aesthetics can also inform researchers about aspects of the human unconscious, particularly emotions. Therefore, while one cannot get directly into the minds of gay spectators of diva performance or the spectators of these gay spectators, one *can* postulate an uncanny way of looking at these diva performances. We can explore what aspects in the realm of fantasy or fiction are brought into the everyday through diva or drag performance. When this happens, how do these performances excite dread in audience members? Can these feelings of fear be reframed? Can the fear that is evoked from these performances cause
audiences to run to picket lines in political protest? Fear can potentially be good. It gets individuals to act, to move, whether it is in their own personal lives or the public sphere. The only way we can understand how this fear can be reframed and how evoking feelings of the uncanny can be a political resource is by analyzing the aesthetics of diva performances and how audience members interact with performers.

This essay will explore the effects of the uncanny from diva performance on two levels: gay spectators of diva performance (incorporating female musicians and drag performers) and the spectators of the gay spectator. I define this multi-layered affect of the uncanny as the “double whammy of the uncanny.” Many individuals have analyzed feelings of the uncanny evoked from a seeing a single event. However, few have taken into consideration feelings of the uncanny produced for spectators of spectators who are experiencing feelings of the uncanny due to a single event (or in this case, performance). Through an autoethnographic account, where researcher becomes subject (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I try to start a conversation between Freud, postmodern feminists, and structural feminists on how the ability to evoke feelings of the uncanny can be a tool for self understanding and political action. I will attempt to show that while we may originally believe aspects of our lives should be kept hidden (especially relating to sexual orientation and gender identity), we need moments of disruption and feelings of the uncanny to help bring them to light. In a fight for queer equality, it is ultimately necessary to bring these aspects to light.

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“The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the ‘double’
being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one,
no doubt, in which it wore a more friendly aspect.” (Freud, 1919, p. 10)

I could vomit any second. I sweat profusely underneath the blue sweater, khaki
skirt, and panty hose. The cotton material mixed with the sweat makes me itch. I’m an
18-year-old senior in high school and I am completing my final project for my American
Government class. This final assignment is an actual political campaign. We make a
campaign slogan, materials, and a commercial. We hold an election with other
candidates. Other classes at my high school are invited into the auditorium to vote.

I think back to four weeks ago when my group had to come up with a character
for a mock election campaign. My instructor said that we could pick any character from
a television show or movie. I came up with the idea to play Mrs. Doubtfire from the
1990s comedy in which Robin Williams does a drag performance of an elderly woman in
order to spend more time with his children after an ugly divorce. I remember my two
fellow group members giggling and looking at me quizzically when I told them my idea.
“Humorous campaigns have usually been successful in the past,” I explain. I remember
that a really popular football player had done drag for his campaign the year before and
won the election.

After giving my explanation for choosing Doubtfire, my two group members agree
that I will play her for our campaign. The next four weeks are full of anxiety and glee as
we prep for the big day. We are excited because this project has become a lot of fun but
stressed because it is almost 40 percent of our final grade. We try not to think too much
about the latter and enjoy the process. We pick out clothes for me at a local thrift store.

The clerk looks annoyed as I try on several different skirts and tops. Our slogan is, “Squash America’s doubt in government and vote Doubtfire!” I borrow a blonde wig and earrings from my French teacher. I practice Doubtfire’s voice alone in my room. I look in the mirror as I draw out my oooos and punctuate the “e” in the word dear. I giggle as I say, “I’m a hip old granny who can be bop, hip hop, dance ‘til ya drop, and yo yo make a mean cup a cocoa!” I’m surprised at how easily I slip into this role. I feel strange but comfortable in her persona.

Finally, Election Day arrives. I’m petrified. Constant worry fills my thoughts. Are they going to make fun of me? Are they going to find out that I’m gay? Will I survive the hallways after this performance? Are we going to get an A? Will we win?

Finally I hear, “Please welcome, Miss Euphegenia Doubtfire!” Aerosmith’s “Dude Looks Like a Lady” starts playing. I begin to walk slowly down the aisle. As I walk past the rows of seats, I try to catch how the students are reacting. Most are laughing hysterically, and they are also cheering. I breathe a sigh of relief. Some of my fears are diminished at least temporarily.

I take my place on stage and begin dancing with a broom to the song. The crowd goes wild. I cannot believe that I am teased for being feminine in my everyday life but in this moment of gender disruption, I am applauded. They love me even though I am defying the seemingly concrete gender norms and rituals of an American high school. They cannot get enough me. I revel in the spotlight. The high of the musical performance gets me through the campaign speech. I leave the stage feeling confident.
After the votes are tallied, my group is disappointed to find that we received second place. A Star Wars character defeats me. A reporter for the school newspaper interviews me about the election. After the interview, I ask her when the article will come out. We are lucky enough to have our school paper inserted into the town’s paper for the whole community to read. She informs me it will come out Friday morning. It’s Monday. I make a mental note to remember to check the paper four days from now.

Before I leave to go home, I give the wig and earrings back to my teacher. I change into my original clothes and I quickly throw the Doubtfire outfit into the dumpster of the school parking lot. I feel like these clothes are dangerous and I must get rid of them. A costume that is celebrated in one performance space can quickly taint another. I drive home from school reflecting on the afternoon’s events.

I really enjoyed being her, but I don’t think I would want to be her all the time. When I performed her, I felt more feminine and playful. I felt more like the person I wanted to be every day. In those moments on stage, a part of my self was laid bare. And those who usually wanted to destroy that part of me glorified it...

On Friday morning, I wake up to the sound of my alarm at 5AM, two hours earlier than I usually wake up. My father is drinking coffee and watching television. “You’re up early,” he says. I respond, “Oh, I just needed to get a drink of water.” I walk out to the back porch. My heart starts pounding as I notice the daily paper has not arrived. Only a minute passes, but it feels like an hour, and I see the paperboy. He throws the paper to me.

My hands are shaking as I rip the paper open and turn to the student section. I flip through the articles and find a picture of me as Mrs. Doubtfire. Without reading the
In drag performance, we see what looks like a female on stage, but we know or think we know the performer is, biologically, a man. This sight/site produces a feeling of the uncanny. Garlick (2010) writes, “Drag allegorizes the melancholic process whereby the disavowed feminine position is taken on in the form of an identification. Drag is uncanny in so far as it involves something that is familiar (the performance of femininity) becoming strange and unsettling through the return of a secret disruptive desire that is found at the limits of identity” (p. 150). This secret disruptive desire is to breach traditional performances of gender perpetuated by the heterosexual matrix.

The heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999) of society has created an ideological structure in which sex, gender, and sexual orientation are connected and interpreted through a heteronormative lens. Under this matrix, a biological male is supposed to be masculine and desire women. A biological woman is supposed to be feminine and desire men. When an individual does not follow one or any of these patterns, the matrix is disrupted and he or she may possibly be disciplined for this disruption.

However, Butler (1999) addresses the power such a disruption can have. Drag performance is one political tactic in disrupting the heterosexual matrix. Butler (1999) argues that drag performance shows gender as not something one is, but a performance one does over and over. She describes drag performance as a subversive act (an act of
parody) that points out the ideology and disciplining of gender as an essential category. Drag performance separates gender and sex, showing that individuals can be male or female regardless of genitalia. Drag performance makes the concept of gender itself uncanny by showing that our rules for gender performance are continuously contested and socially constructed—not inherent truths.

Furthermore, Butler (1999) argues, “It [drag performance] reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (p. 187). Suddenly those assumed experiences of “man” and “woman” are questioned. Society’s constructed gendered scripts of body movement, dress, and personality traits and desire can be altered. Butler (1999) writes, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (p. 187). Drag performance unleashes a secret: Gender is “produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (p. 186). The “inner truth” of gender does not exist and is a fantasy inscribed and instituted on the surface of bodies and some bodies are policed and punished for not doing gender correctly.

Perhaps this is why gay men are so drawn to diva/drag performance. They learn that men do not have to be attracted to women under a “heterosexual coherent” view of society—a view of society that falls under the heterosexual matrix, where all men are presumed straight and masculine. This unveiled secret can be strikingly beautiful, creating giddiness and excitement at the open display of information that gay men might have always been aware of but was kept hidden by various factors. Royle (2003) suggests that the uncanny “can also be a matter of something strangely beautiful, bordering on
ecstasy (too good to be true), or eerily reminding us of something, like *déjà vu*” (p. 2).

Diva performance can strengthen a gay man’s sense of self. By watching the performance, he may remember times in his past when he felt incoherence with some aspect of the biological male pattern of the heterosexual matrix (biological man->masculine->desiring biological women). While watching a drag performer, he may remember times when he had desires or still desires to disrupt the pattern either by wanting to come out as gay, wanting to perform a feminine identity, or desiring other biological men (who may be masculine or feminine). The discipline of the matrix, something very familiar that has been incorporated into a gay man’s consciousness, is made very strange. And yet, the desire to disrupt any aspect of this pattern is strangely familiar.

Furthermore, a primarily dyadic and relational model of self-recognition is displaced. Butler (2004) writes that we can discover who we are not merely from a relational dyad but from “a historical legacy and futural horizon that is not contained by the Other, but which constitutes something like the Other of the Other, a subject in a temporal chain of desire that only occasionally and provisionally assumes the form of the dyad” (p. 151). A gay man’s self concept does not have to just be determined from a comparison-contrast to the diva/drag performer. There have been multiple moments throughout history where human beings have wanted to disrupt all patterns of the heterosexual matrix in some way.

In moments of diva performance, a gay man may realize that his desire for diva performance reaches beyond his own struggles in life. Both may yearn for love and adoration from others, strength and resistance within structures of patriarchy, and sexual
prowess without judgment. The gay man recognizes these common struggles, yet also acknowledges there are many challenges women must still face that he does not have to face. Suddenly, there is more involved in the process of identification than simply comparing common traits and desires between gay man and diva or drag performer. Her performance shows the gay man that there is a need for empathy—to be able to understand the different challenges that women face but at the same time recognize how gay men and women can work together.

In fact, this performance engagement should be a symbol of the interconnectedness of homophobia and sexism. Pharr (1997) argues that homophobia is a weapon of sexism. According to Pharr, when women appear too independent for some men they may call them lesbians (also known as “lesbian baiting”). She also argues that this type of misogyny can get transferred to gay men. Pharr writes, “When gay men break ranks with male roles through bonding and affection outside the arenas of war and sports, they are perceived as not being ‘real men,’ that is, as being identified with women, the weaker sex that must be dominated and that over the centuries has been the object of male hatred and abuse” (p. 19). Diva performance can help gay men become aware of this interconnectedness of homophobia and sexism and that by engaging in diva performance both women and gay men can work together to overthrow male dominance and compulsive heterosexuality.

And so, Butler (2004) asks, “Is part of what it means to ‘recognize’ the Other that he or she comes, of necessity, with a history which does not have oneself at its center? Is this not part of the humility necessary in all recognition, and part of recognition that is involved in love?” (p. 146). The gay man has a displacement of self in favor of the other
(in this case the diva). Diva performance can tell gay men that they are not in an oppression sweepstakes with women. Rather, diva or drag performance creates an uncanny moment of recognition, where the gay man realizes that her performance is not merely serving his need for entertainment, but rather narrates the story of the necessity for an alliance in a common fight against heterosexist and patriarchal oppression. Her performance celebrates the victories won thus far in a global war for queer equality, but also re-energizes spectators for the battles to come.

“It would seem as though each one us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be re-activated, and that everything which now strikes us as ‘uncanny’ fulfils the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression” (Freud, 1919, p.13).

“I have to go,” I say frantically.

My three friends look at me in confusion. “Is everything okay?” One of them asks. It’s about 10:30 on a Friday night. We are celebrating the end of a semester in graduate school at a straight club.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just have to go see my girls,” I respond.

My friends laugh, exchanging looks of acknowledgement. They know what I cannot resist—the voice of the diva, the presence of the drag queen, the pulsating thrill of gender undone.
“Alright. We’ll meet up with you later,” one of them says as I rush out the door.

The gay club is only a block down the street. I can almost hear the sounds of Gaga, Cher, Whitney, and Britney. I wonder who I will have the pleasure of viewing tonight. I look at my watch nervously, hoping the show hasn’t already started.

I enter the club and am relieved to see the regular host standing center stage.

The show is just beginning. I grab a beer at the bar and push through the crowd of mostly men to get as close to the stage as possible.

“All right bitches! Grab your drinks and get ready for Tampa’s loveliest ladies. Give it up for our first act of the evening…Anastasia LeMarrrrr!!!”

The crowd roars as Rihanna’s “Rockstar” begins to play and Anastasia walks out on stage. She looks sleek and sexy adorned in a black and gold body suit with leather boots and gloves. Her hair is spiked and she walks with a slow but aggressive stride. She can be described, ultimately, in one word: FIERCE.

She walks down the platform through the middle of the fanatic crowd, snatching dollar bills from outstretched hands. Seductively, she runs her hands through their hair and down their chests. Anastasia lip-syncs, “Rockin’ this skirt. Rockin’ this club. Got my middle finger up. I don’t really give a fuck. To be what you is you gotta be what you are, the only thing that’s missin’ is a black guitar!”

My breath catches in my throat as she inches toward me. I dig through my pockets for a dollar bill. She leans right down toward my face and lip-syncs, “I’mma live my life

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1 Fenty 22-25 & 30-33 in “Rockstar 101”
in the niitight!'' I place the dollar bill in between her breasts and she strides back to the stage.

I feel some sense of déjà vu. I’ve had this sensation before. I remember being at a strip club three years ago in college and stuffing a dollar bill in a female exotic dancer’s G string. My friends were yelling wildly behind me. My heart was pounding. Nerves were pulsating throughout my whole body. However, I was not nervous because I wanted to impress this young female. I was nervous about my performance of heterosexuality. One slip in the script and I would be discovered.

A bridge in the song snaps me back to the present moment. I have conflicting feelings. I’m aroused, but I don’t want her sexually. Has my desire been displaced? Do I want what she has? I start feeling anxious, and I don’t know why. I don’t want to be a woman, but I want her presence in me. I want her “divaness.” I want her strength. My inner feminist screams, “Aren’t you feeding into economic control of the female body even if the drag performer is anatomically male? Are you using her for your own personal satisfaction?”

And then I look at my gay male companions. I watch as they sway together to the music and look at her with admiration. I watch as they cheer with their fists pumping in the air. I watch as they sing along to the music. I join them in the completely physical and mental overtaking of the performance. One of the reasons we love Anastasia is because she symbolizes possible victory in the battles we fight everyday. We fight for our jobs and homes. Some of us fight for marriage. Some of us fight to be recognized out from this confinement of gendered binaries. We desire her strength and confidence to be able to

2 Fenty 63-64 in “Rockstar 101”
express who she is without fear. Anastasia provides us with a temporary utopia from these battles—a place where the outcasts can come together and where we can rejuvenate and form tighter bonds in community. It also provides a space for us to invite others out of this world that seek wisdom—on tolerance, diversity, and love.

She is giving us a course on how to fight bigotry, homophobia, and resist structures of oppression. We may be giving her dollar bills but in a different context than the exotic stripper. The money is compensation for and recognition of the drag queen’s labor and art—her pedagogical and politically activist performance. We are saying thank you for the beautiful lessons you are teaching us. Thank you for taking a chance and showing us we can tell those that try to stuff gender roles down our throats daily to fuck off. Thank you for showing us an alternative reality where sexual binaries are redundant and everyone is incredibly queer. Queer being defined as an umbrella term that encompasses multiple subjectivities of gender and race, not in opposition to one another but co-constructed and interconnected in beauty. Queer in the ways we express sexual desire. Queer in the way we emotionally feel for one another. Queer in the way we construct our identities—identities that are relational achievements emergent in performance.

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Some feminists (MacKinnon, 1991; Nussbaum, 1999) have been highly critical of or their work is in direct opposition to Butler’s theories on subversive acts of gender parody. They believe drag performance and gender performativity has very little effect on social transformation and the promotion of queer equality. Nussbaum (1999) argues that Butler’s theory has no structural or material consequences. She writes, “Isn’t this
like saying to a slave that the institution of slavery will never change, but you can find ways of mocking it and subverting it, finding your personal freedom within those acts of carefully limited defiance?” (p. 8) She calls Butler’s feminism passive, pessimistic, and self-involved. She expresses her concern about Butler’s proposed strategies of political resistance:

Butler suggests to her readers that this sly send-up of the status quo is the only script for resistance that life offers. Well, no. Besides offering many other ways to be human in one’s personal life, beyond traditional norms of domination and subservience, life also offers many scripts for resistance that do not focus narcissistically on personal self-presentation. Such scripts involve feminists (and others, of course) in building laws and institutions, without much concern for how a woman displays her own body and its gendered nature: in short, they involve working for others who are suffering. (p. 10)

Nussbaum not only sees Butler’s theoretical work lacking any political implications but also as a threat to those who fight for queer equality.

Butler (1993) responds to this and similar critiques in her work Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex. On the opposition between postmodern and structural feminists, she argues:

My sense is that now this very opposition needs to be rethought in order to muddle the lines between queer theory and feminism. For surely is as unacceptable to insist that relations of sexual subordination determine gender position as it is to separate radically forms of sexuality form the workings of gender norms. (p. 239)

She calls feminist frameworks like those of Nussbaum and MacKinnon “deterministic” and “rigid.” These frameworks also do not consider instances of sexual disciplining where gender is a central concern such as the prohibition of sodomy, public sex, and consensual homosexuality.

Also, in Butler’s Undoing Gender, she discusses this opposition even more specifically in relation to her theories on gender parody and drag performance. Butler
(2004) believes that theory is transformative, but for social and political transformation, "Something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels that involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory. I would add, however, that in all of these practices, theory is presupposed" (p. 205). Feminism is often concerned with questions of how one should live a life, but Butler argues that feminism is ultimately about how one survives. Scripts on how one should live a life are constructed dependent upon a particular type of feminism (liberal, socialist, radical, among others). Liberal feminists argue we should live our lives according to the principle that all individuals, regardless of sex, are equal under the law. Socialist feminists promote the principle that capitalism is the root of gender inequality. Some radical feminists argue for a way of life that completely separates men and women.

Ultimately, many of these “ways of life” proposed through feminism have several problems. First, many of these feminisms place too much emphasis on a biological male/female struggle for equality not taking into account gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals. Next, too much hope is invested in social change just through proposing ideas that ask people to simply look at the world differently. While educating others on how lives should be lived, in order to provide queer equality, we must not forget the realities in which we currently live. Structures will not change overnight, and some individuals do not just need a feminist moral compass, but a feminism that helps them live in a threatening environment. Feminists should ask, “What threat of death is delivered to those who do not live gender according to its accepted norms?” (p. 205).

Butler draws connections between theories of gender and questions of violence. She also
acknowledges the paradox of norms: we cannot live without them but their form is neither given nor fixed and we do not have to accept them as they are. Postmodern feminists and structural feminists do not have to work in opposition. Subversive acts or gender parody can encourage larger, institutional change. While Butler argues for resistance within structures of power, I argue the possibility of overthrowing some should not be completely ruled out. Frye (1983) once compared oppression to the interconnected wirings of a birdcage. In order for the bird to be free, each ring of the cage must be taken out one by one.

Supporting her earlier work on drag performance, Butler argues, “The point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” (p. 218). Drag performance is not only a way to think about how gender is performed, but, Butler states, how it is “re-signified through collective terms” (p. 216). Gay men treat drag performance as an entertainment that strengthens social bonds. Drag creates a “cultural life of fantasy.” Butler argues, “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (p. 217). And in some cases, when brought home, it can produce feelings of a productive uncanny. Multiple and repeated life experiences perpetuated by the heterosexual matrix are disrupted. Men who sleep with other men desire a feminine performer (who appears to be a biological woman but is in fact a man). Multiple possibilities exist behind their reasons for viewing this performer beyond sexual desire. This is quite different from a scenario of the typical strip club but in some ways is still familiar to us. A heterosexist
mode of spectatorship is embodied during drag performance, but the “elsewhere” of feelings, situations, desires situated outside of the heterosexual matrix are brought home—for the gay man and for those watching him watch the performer (the double whammy of the uncanny). This reaffirms a gay man’s sense of self while simultaneously inviting spectators of him to be his ally and an ally for others who are disciplined under the matrix.

Furthermore, Butler states fantasy does not just impact the mind. It structures how we relate with others. Butler writes, “We are talking about a cultural life of fantasy that not only organizes the material conditions of life, but which also produces sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible, and which works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia” (p. 216). It causes us to question our bodies and the spaces they inhabit. Fantasy, whether in drag or other performances, not only asks us to question what is real, and what must be, but shows us how we can question contemporary notions of reality and institute new forms of reality—where spectators can be inspired by performances to make their own lives and worlds better. Performance allows those on the margins (in this case sexual minorities) to invite those from the outside into their cultural life of fantasy. By sharing in this fantasy, they become more aware of the possibilities for life outside oppressive structures perpetuated by the heterosexual matrix.

In fact, we can clearly see from the following example how “those outside” are invited in by considering Farmer’s (2005) commentary on a scene from Philadelphia. Tom Hank’s character Andrew is meeting with his lawyer Joe (played by Denzel Washington) to discuss a civil lawsuit brought on by Andrew being fired from his firm
because he is HIV positive. During the meeting, Maria Callas’s “Le Momma Morta” begins to play, and Andrew actively engages in the recording by reciting lines in English and swaying slowly back and forth to the music. Farmer postulates what Joe must be feeling while watching Andrew when he writes:

Perhaps, then, the truly terrifying aspect of the sublime spectacle of gay diva worship as envisioned in Philadelphia, what sends the otherwise stouthearted Joe running anxiously from the apartment, is not its display of a homosexuality demonized as the other of a stable heterosexual norm but its display rather of a (homo)sexuality run amok, one that refuses to remain within the categorical divisions that regulate the scripts and legibilities of hegemonic sexuality and that thus problematizes the possibility of any stable term of erotic reference: hetero or homo. (p. 182)

The cultural life of fantasy can be extremely frightening for some. Joe may have run away at first, but in the end he comes to Andy’s aid during the trial. They form an alliance and close friendship. It is no surprise that Andy’s engagement with “Le Momma Morta” caused so much fear in Joe since the heterosexual matrix is so ingrained in the ways we view art and entertainment.

Specifically, “scripts and legibilities of hegemonic sexuality” are often represented in musical performance. Especially in the realm of popular music, sex dominates images in music videos, the lyrics in songs, and the personae of the performer. While I have discussed the scenario of men at a strip joint, I would now like to propose how feelings of the uncanny brought on by drag performance can disrupt another mode of heterosexist spectatorship. This is the scenario of the hysterical female fan and male musician. This is also working under the heterosexual matrix (biological woman->feminine->desiring biological man). Throughout history, there have been representations in popular culture of male musicians being worshiped by screaming, hysterical female fans. From Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and more recently boy bands like
N’Sync and Backstreet boys, these performances have provided scripts for desire—furthering a hetero/homo binary.

Images of gay diva worship rupture dominant ideologies of sexual desire in popular music performances. When audiences see gay men worshiping female performers or drag queens, they again may feel something strange but also simultaneously familiar. They have most likely seen hysterical and excited fans of musical performers, but this type of hysteria does not fit the dominant heterosexist representations of fandom. Grown men yelling and screaming in excitement, jumping up and down, and singing at levels way above their natural octave range, does not fit within heterosexist modes of spectatorship. These behaviors especially do not fit in relation to a female (or what appears to be biologically female) performer. Individuals have seen this type of hysterical fandom but not usually in this particular context. The directions of desire under the matrix are disrupted. This is what makes the familiar strange. Gay men are supposed to be attracted to other men, and even though audiences are aware of this, a productive feeling of the uncanny is produced when watching gay diva worship.

In fact, the double whammy of the uncanny was clearly present in my show. The audience was able to see how I and other gay men experienced feelings of the uncanny from diva performance. In my own personal narrative, I described how my love of female Disney villains and the wicked witch from the Wizard of Oz made me question my gender identity. I showed how Natasha’s Bedingfield’s song “Unwritten” influenced me to come out as a gay man. Darren’s monologue showed how Cher’s performance made him question his sexual orientation and the power dynamics within an abusive relationship. Samson’s monologue showed how the performance of a drag queen caused
an uncanny moment of recognition—informing him that he too wanted to participate in drag performance.

In the final scene, when I performed as and in a way became Lady Gaga, there was a moment of recognition among audience members. This scene of play may have been something familiar to them. They too may have freely experimented with gender roles throughout childhood. However, the familiar was made strange when they saw a grown man engage in this type of play. This scene could have potentially evoked feelings of the uncanny giving the audience the following message: There are not enough safe spaces in this world to for sexual minorities to play—to survive. More of these safe spaces need to be created and sustained in order to promote a complete transformation of society.

In summary, Freud’s theory of the uncanny has been analyzed in many contexts of scholarship. However, most work on the uncanny unfortunately does not address its productive and politically activist components. Feelings of the uncanny brought forth from diva/drag performance can bring personal growth and self-awareness to not only gay men, but others who feel they do not fit within the gendered matrix of society. We must remember that while the uncanny can produce fear, sometimes fear can be a valuable tool—a tool that is often used by those in power to keep those on the margins disciplined or oppressed. The marginalized can use feelings of the uncanny to bring hidden aspects of their lives to light—aspects they may originally have thought should have been hidden. Also, they can use the uncanny as a political tool by crafting subversive performances that evoke feelings of the uncanny. These will possibly rupture modes of heterosexist spectatorship constructed under the heterosexual matrix, and invite
those in more privileged positions into their cultural life of fantasy. The hope is that by educating others through performance, and by evoking feelings of the uncanny, a cultural life of fantasy can become reality.

In a world of constant surveillance and bigotry, those within a heterosexist society fear being watched. This fear can be minimized when they embrace the potential of the uncanny and realize that maybe they want to be watched. By being watched, maybe those who fit outside of the heterosexist view of the world can be fully recognized. Society will realize that there is a possible life outside gay/straight and man/woman. As Butler (2004) states, “The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (p. 219). A recognized and possible life is a necessity for survival. By not acknowledging the beautifully unique aspects of all individuals, we run the risk of dehumanizing people. When we do not alter our language and worldviews to be able to incorporate a full spectrum of queer identity, we are giving the message to some that they do not matter. When this error occurs, people are not only neglected but also abused. However, we can make a change. The fear of surveillance can be decreased when we realize that the body in performance can change minds and open eyes to a gendered reality outside of particular and familiar comfort zones. Drag performance can enhance the bonds between those on the margins and their potential allies and perhaps it can scare some sense into those individuals who try to refuse the possibility of others’ lives.
You wake up with a pounding headache and wonder what happened in the last few hours of the evening before. You look around and let out a sigh of relief when you realize you are in your own bed. Bright red catches your eye as you look down at your hand clasped upon your chest. Your fingernails are screaming flames. You roll your eyes at your friends’ mischievous joke. “Real” men do not wear fingernail polish.

You walk to the bedroom next door to find your roommate giggling.

“Very funny!” You exclaim. “Now give me your fucking polish remover.”

She grabs it out of her desk drawer and playfully sways it back and forth within your grasp. “Are you sure you want it back? I think it’s a good look for you!”

You quickly snatch it from her. “We’ll talk about your misbehavior later,” you joke.

You shake your head in disbelief as you look at yourself in the bathroom mirror. A large penis is drawn next to your mouth. You shrug your shoulders. You do enjoy the cock.

After thoroughly washing your face, you begin to use the fingernail polish remover. One by one you slowly scrape the ruby red paint off your nails. It makes you think of Dorothy and how there’s no place like home. You get to your last pinkie finger and hesitate.

You decide to leave that nail painted. It definitely feels out of place. It’s vulnerable. It gives you the same feeling you have when you are first naked in front of a partner-anxiety about being exposed, but excitement about what is to come. You decide to keep it painted for a while. Maybe a few days. Maybe more.

You wonder if Cher ever paints her nails this color.
CHAPTER THREE: MY BAD ROMANCE, EXPLORING THE QUEER SUBLIMITY OF DIVA RECEPTION

Introduction/ An Evening of Karaoke

(The room is in complete darkness except for the projector at the front of the stage. Images of music divas from history appear in this order: Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, Cher, Whitney Houston, Madonna, Britney Spears, Beyonce, Rihanna, and Lady Gaga. These images include still shots and pictures from the divas’ live performances. Rihanna’s “Who’s that Chick?” is playing.)

(Black back drop. I walk in from stage right.)

It’s a Wednesday evening and karaoke night at a local gay bar.

I walk in and greet the DJ.

Blake, where have you been?

Come on Charlie, it’s only been two weeks!

On my way to the bar I make exchanges with the regulars. (I make invisible exchanges with kisses on the men’s cheeks.) Hey gurl, heyyy!

I look around and see men everywhere. Some are playing pool in the back room. Some are sitting in corners of the bar. Some are sitting at small tables lit by candlelight. Some are yelling with excitement. NO HE DID NOT! GURL, I NEED A DRINK! SHUT
THE FRONT DOOR! Some men chat in intimate whispers, giving each other inviting looks of seduction.

The bar exudes an electrifying energy of old ties and new beginnings.

I pass the bowl of brightly colored condoms on the cigarette machine and sit close to the stage. I try to pick the perfect song to perform.

(I sit down in a seat next to the mike stand and start browsing through a booklet.)


DJ: ALRIGHT! LET’S GET BLAKE UP TO THE STAGE FOR HIS FIRST SONG OF THE EVENING!

Oh crap! I guess here goes nothing…

(I go to the mike as “Proud Mary” and pictures of Tina Turner play in the background.)

I study divas. (pause)

Judy, Liza, Babs, Bette, these are names you shan’t forget. You’ve never heard that?

I am on a first date with John. I try to avoid speaking about my work on the first or second date. I’ve noticed that some men get nervous when you use words like phenomenology and heteronormativity in conversation. But I am so immersed in this project. I am eating, drinking, sleeping, and shitting divas. They infiltrate my every thought. They fill the pages of every term paper. They haunt my dreams.
Don’t you notice this mad fandom among gay men and music divas? I mean sure right now we’ve got Lady Gaga..But if you look back… It’s historic! Think about Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, Cher, Madonna! John stares at me like I’m possessed.

But then (pause) a look of recognition. He knows the code of homosexuality. I just say Tina Turner and BAM! There he goes. The confession of diva love unfolds. Being in high school, still closeted, blaring “Proud Mary” in his room and singing along.

“Big wheel keep on turnin’! Proud Mary keep on burnin’! Rollin’! Rollin’!
Rollin’ on a river! Doo doo doo doo doo doo!” The diva’s voice is the thread of gay brotherhood or “sister”hood. I don’t get too caught up in labels.

John asks me what I want to find out about gay men and divas. What answers will I hope to find about the “queer sublimity of diva reception?”

(Pause)

It’s not always about the answers. Sometimes it’s about embracing the moment. When all this is done maybe I’ll be more confused then when I started. But maybe I’ll know why we love these women so much. Most have been through hell whether it’s with men, drug abuse, scrutiny from the press about their weight, a poor upbringing, whatever! But they still always look and sound fabulous—the stars of the show!

They give us a beat to shake our asses to on the dance floor. They provide a safe space for us to return to during heartbreak, illness, or death. They celebrate our victories with us. These women, even from a distance, can affect us so much.

How do their performances inspire gay men to take charge of their lives? How do they encourage visions of a better, more accepting world? How do they help us unleash our inner diva within?
I think about what would I ask my divas if they were here instead of John. Judy—Did you think your father was gay? Were two of your former lovers gay? Bette—What was it like singing in a bathhouse? Madonna—Why do the gays love “Like a Prayer” so much? Is it really all because of the lyric about getting down on your knees that excites us? And how do you really feel about Lady Gaga? Cher—Would Sonny have been just as supportive of Chasity’s sexual reassignment surgery as you have been? And how the hell do you look so good for 64? And finally, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, Lady Gaga, yes…that’s her real name. Who do you have this bad romance with and why do you really think that if you have sex with a man he will take your creativity?

My diva love started way before Gaga.

**Childhood Diva**

*(Projector shows pictures of female Disney villains. “Cruella De Vil” is playing.)*

Cruella De Vil

Cruella De Vil

If she doesn’t scare ya

No evil thing will

To see her is to

Take a sudden chill

Cruella, cruella De Vil  (Leven 1-2)

Just picture me at seven years old. ANITA! DAHLING! WHERE ARE THE PUPPIES?

I loved all the female villains in Disney movies.
They craved beauty. They craved fame. They craved power. And they did whatever they could to fulfill their desires, even if others judged them. I wanted to express all my desires, whether it was the warmth of a male playmate’s hand or to be the lead in the school play, without fear. These particular desires that were and sometimes are still considered “tainted” ruptures in society. Maybe that’s why I felt great sympathy, not just adoration, for the female outcast. I still do.

This definitely worried my parents. Not only did I idolize female characters, I idolized the characters who were manipulative, demonic, psychotic. What was to become of their little boy?

(Blake in his family living room. I transform into my six year old self and stand in a corner of the room talking to myself and making hand motions.)

Me: Before the sun sets on the eve of her 16th birthday, she shall prick her finger. On the spindle of a spinning wheel. AND DIE! Hahahahaha!

(I walk back to center stage to perform conversation between parents.)

My parents.

Father: What the hell is he doing? It ain’t right. It just ain’t right. What’s the matter with that boy?

Mother: Oh, Lindon Ray. Let him be. He’s just pretending!

Father: Why doesn’t he ever want to go outside and throw a ball around or something? Get dirty. Play with a fucking toy truck or something.

Mother: Blake is just special.
(Blake accompanying his mother at the local drug store. I skip back and forth through the “aisle” singing “Ding, Dong the Witch is Dead.” I abruptly stop and stare at my mother. I begin shaking my head furiously back and forth.)

NO, MOM! NOT SUMMER’S EVE! YOU NEED TO BUY MASSENGILL!

MASSENGILL! MASSENGILL! MASSENGILL!

(Blake in kindergarten story hour. I sit on the floor cross legged and frantically raise my hand.)

OH OH OH! MRS. DOUGLAS! MRS. DOUGLAS! I HAVE A QUESTION. I WAS WONDERING…DO YOU WAX YOUR EYEBROWS?

Special indeed. A diva in the making.

I loved Disney movies, but the “Wizard of Oz” was my absolute favorite! I would diva it up in my father’s restaurant. (Switch to picture of Wicked Witch.)

Me: I’LL GET YOU MY PRETTY AND YOUR LITTLE DOG TOO! (Belt out large cackle.)

My father was clearly not amused.

Father: Blake! Quit dancing on the tabletops and leave the servers alone! This is a restaurant not a the-a-ter! Go home with your mother right now!

Sometimes I felt like Dorothy Gale from Kansas. Growing up in a small town, trapped in rural isolation, singing along with her did I know at that moment that I would fulfill the grand narrative of the gay farm boy taking on the world and making the journey from bland cornfields to bright city lights? From stormy skies to rainbows?

I know I’m not the only small town boy who has fulfilled this journey.
DJ: CAN WE GET ROBERT UP TO THE STAGE! ROBERT! ARE YOU THERE?

**Robert and Country Divas**

*(I turn around and put on cowboy hat. Wynonna Judd’s “No One Else on Earth” plays. Pictures of country divas show in the background.)*

*(In southern accent) Reba. Trisha. Wynonna. Martina. These were my divas. I grew up in a small town in Tennessee. Dad worked in a factory. Mom was a kindergarten teacher. I was real close to her. I remember listening to music on Sunday afternoon after church while she cooked dinner in the kitchen. I’d giggle as she danced back and forth in her apron, throwing food in the fryer or pulling things out of the oven. We’d also listen to our favorite singers late at night before going to bed, watching CMT videos. It provided nice break for her as she attempted to balance her checkbook.*

*(mother’s voice) Damn, it! I’m off by four dollars.*

Trisha Yearwood was our favorite diva. Mom came from a wealthy background. She said that Trisha’s “She’s In Love with the Boy” always reminded her of when she first dated my dad.

*(Mother’s voice) “Ma and Pa weren’t too fond of your dad. He grew up poor, and they didn’t think he could support me. But I knew he was a good man and as Trisha sings, ‘Even if I have to run away. I’m gonna marry that boy someday’ (Ims 16-17). Remember, Robert. Love ain’t easy and sometimes you gotta fight for it. But don’t you worry, you’ll find someone and hopefully your daddy and I will love her just as much as you do.”*
Love her. Mamma said she always wondered about me likin’ the boys, but she always kept quiet about it because of dad. I remember when I first told her I was gay. “I know baby. I’ve known since you were itty bitty. But let’s keep this between us for now. I don’t want your daddy gettin’ upset. You know how he is…”

Mamma suffered from a painful bone cancer. Martina McBride helped her get through her final days. There’s a song she sings called “Broken Wing” about a troubled marriage, but mama used it to fit her illness. (sing) “And with a broken wing. She still sings. She keeps an eye on the sky. With a broken wing. She carries her dreams. Man you ought to see her fly!” (Barnhart, Hogan & House 9-12)

Sometimes the song would move her to the point of tears. It upset me to see her in so much pain. But I’m glad she had those songs to give her strength. I like singing country songs when I come here. They remind me of her and the fact that she is up in heaven still singing. It also reminds me that no matter what struggles come my way, I just gotta keep on goin’.

Country divas also show me that it’s okay to let loose and have some fun! You don’t have to be classy all the time. I live by Gretchen Wilson’s motto when she sings, “I’m a redneck woman, I ain’t no high class broad. I’m just a product of my raisin’” (Rich & Wilson 11-13). And yes, I do say “hey y’all” and “yee-haw!” (14) Thank you.

Judy Stays

(Each projector shows a different picture of Judy Garland at different points in her life. “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” is playing.)

Meet Francis Ethel Hamm or the woman we know as Judy Garland.
Judy came from a showbiz family. She began her career singing with her two sisters in her father’s theater. By 13, she had signed on with MGM studios. Some said she looked too old to play children’s roles and too young for leading lady roles. She felt self-conscious and anxious about her appearance. Her managers put caps on her teeth and insert rubberized disks in her nose. She taped her breasts down. It was the sad, old story of the “ugly duckling.”

(The projector switches to pictures of me as a kid.)

I can relate to the ugly duckling syndrome. I was chubby and I wore glasses. My heaviness, eccentric personality, and feminized mannerisms gave the guys my age plenty of ammunition to use against me. (in voice of tormentors) HEY TITTY BOY! FUCKING FAGGOT! GO CRY TO YOUR MOMMY!

If I had a dollar for every time my nipples were twisted, I would be a wealthy man.

(Projectors switch to pictures of me in high school. I’m in my band uniform. There are also a few shots of me in the school musicals.)

Things did get better in high school. I fell in love with music. I joined the school’s choir and band. Music allowed me to escape my insecurities. During the three or four minutes of a song, I was in heaven. All of my worries and fears were gone. Just like when I watch a diva on stage. Her voice can provide comfort from the harsh realities of the world.

(Slide switch back to Judy pictures and “I Could Go On Singing” starts playing.)

Things got better for Judy too. At 16, she got her big breakthrough role as Dorothy Gale in The Wizard of Oz. This earned her a Juvenile Academy Award and started her career as a major film star. The ugly duckling became a swan, a star, a diva.
Of course, her life wasn’t always pleasant. Her self-consciousness about her appearance haunted her. She became addicted to prescription drugs and died at the age of 47 of a drug overdose. It was June 22, 1969, just days before the Stonewall Riots. Some argue her death was a catalyst for the gay and lesbian liberation movement.

In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, gays and lesbians fought against a police raid on the Stonewall Inn of Greenwich Village in New York City. It marked the first time in history that sexual minorities collectively fought back against government discrimination.

People signed in at the Stonewall Inn because the owners did not have a liquor license. There are rumors that many of the men signed their names under pseudonyms, and Judy Garland was a popular choice. Garland encourages us to go on singing. Until the cows come home and the rooster starts to crow. No matter what hardships we may face in our life.

DJ: NEXT UP IS DARREN! EVERYBODY WELCOME DARREN TO THE STAGE!

Darren and Cher

I am still not out to everyone. Some of my friends know I’m gay, but that is about it. My parents might suspect it. I hate to admit it, but I still put up an act every time I’m around my male friends. Trying to be one of the “guys,” I talk about beer and sports and tits. I have a pretty good act going. Most of the guys believe it. Except one of them. I don’t think Mark believed my performance for a second.

I was only about 12 or 13 when Cher’s song “Believe” was popular. I knew who Cher was, but I didn’t really know much about her. But there was something about that
song. The way her voice took on this other worldly electronic vibrato. It was mysterious. It was sexy.

But “Believe” was a guilty pleasure. One time I was on the way home from the grocery store with my mom and it came on the radio. (*I begin to fist pump and yell, “Do you BELIEVE” and then abruptly stop.*) And I would think, “NO! I can’t sing that. Not now.” Then as soon as we would get home, I’d go to my room shove my headphones in and just let go to the song, her voice.

Mark was my roommate junior year of college. We did typical “straight” guy things. All it took was a slight touch on his thigh while watching football and we become much more than friends.

But our relationship was a secret. He struggled with his sexuality too, and he was not out to anyone. I think the strain of keeping his sexuality secret also put a strain on our relationship. In an attempt to reassert his masculinity, he became aggressive.

“Shut the fuck up and take it!” He screamed at me one evening, shoving me up against a wall and penetrating me. This was not aggressive sexual foreplay. It was rape. It happened more than once. I’m not sure what was worse, that or when he started to hit me. In some twisted way, each blow made me love him more. Maybe I felt that I needed to be punished. All I know is that after about three months of ongoing abuse, my best girlfriend finally said, “You need to end this. Now!”

So, months before the lease was up, she helped move me out of our apartment. Mark knew I was moving out, but we decided to complete the moving process while he was at work. After I moved out and ended the relationship, I still grieved. I still wanted what we once had. Before the rape. Before the beatings. Before the shame.
Cher helped me get over him. I loved her song “Strong Enough.” Whenever I missed Mark, I put it on and let the lyrics of the song empower me. “Now I’m strong enough to live without you. Strong enough and I quit crying. Long enough, now I’m strong enough to know. You gotta go.”

I’m Coming Out

(The music switches to Diana Ross’s “I’m Coming Out.”)

I spend my first two years of college in the closet. When my best friend and freshman roommate Justin decides to come out to all of our friends at the end of our sophomore year, my inner diva tells me, “GIRL. You got to get with IT!” All of our mutual friends are okay with the fact that Justin is gay. My inner diva yells, “It is your turn! Get to that place over the rainbow!”

Flash forward to National Coming Out Day, 2007. I finish having coffee with my two best girlfriends. We drive back to school. I am pissed that I have not told them yet.

Just say it damn it! Natasha Bedingfeld’s “Unwritten” comes on the radio.

(I sing a few of the lyrics.)

Girls, I have to talk to you about something.

(Internal thoughts) Shit! I’m going to vomit! Must. Pull. Over. And then I finally say them, those three words that have haunted me for years.

“I. am. gay.”

They yell at me.
(Friend's voice) We thought you were going to tell us you were dying! (Pause) I feel so much relief. I’m free! And then I think FINALLY NOBODY is going to RAIN ON MY PARADE.

And then my exploration of gay nightlife begins…

(“It’s Raining Men” plays. Blank screen for background.)

Defying Gravity

I have some of the best times with what I called my gay entourage.

There are five of us—young gay college men. Most of us have just come out. And aside from the weekend club outings, we have a weekly tradition: Showtunes Tuesday.

(Pretend I’m doing hair and horn sounding)

I’m coming, I’m coming!

When we get to the bar, it’s always packed.

(I walk around pretending to greet friends and exchanging kisses. I sing a couple lines from a few musical numbers. Defying Gravity starts playing.)

Hey, guys. Ernie’s getting ready to perform!

(To audience) Ernie is a large, gray-haired, middle-aged man. He always comes alone. An enigma. We don’t know much about him. But we do know that he knows how to put on one hell of a show. Every Showtunes Tuesday, at around the same time, he becomes Elphaba from Wicked.

(I grab a broom and put on a witch’s hat. I then jump up on a chair. “Defying Gravity” starts playing.)
In this moment, we see his undoing, his release from the dangers of his world. He is strangely beautiful. And after every performance, the crowd goes wild. His performance tells us that we can defy gravity. But sometimes in order to do that, you have to let go of your insecurities, let go of the past pain of heartbreak, let go of the rage and release the diva within.

(Finish the scene lip singing a part of the song.)

Nights of Diva Debauchery

(I enter frantically.)

Me: Where the hell is she? Excuse, me! (to a patron.) Have you seen my friend? She’s a short Asian woman. She was dressed like Snookie on Jersey Shore! Michelle? Michelle! (I spot her.) Where are your clothes? Why are you just wearing you bra and panties? You sold your dress to the drag queen? Why the hell would you do that? Well I am sure she looks fabulous in it, but do you want to get arrested? Alright, good. Let’s get that set of clothes in your car.

Here are some more sound bites from nights of what I like to call diva debauchery with my friends.

(Club music plays in the background. Slides of pictures with drag queens play in the background. )

Sound bite #1: A drag queen disciplines unruly audience members.

DRAG QUEEN: Bitch, get out of my way! I’m the star here! (singing “Million Dollar Bill”) Hey, you! Yeah you with the cell phone! Whoever you are texting is not ME! So make your booty call plans and put the damn phone away you rude punk!
Sound bite #2: A drag queen praising an audience member for his monetary compensation.

DRAG QUEEN: Thank you, baby! I know what you want! There’s more of this to go around.

Sound bite #3: A drag queen interrupting a moment of intimacy outside a bar.

DRAG QUEEN: Well just look at you two! Ain’t this cute! (makes a cupping motion) ooo he feels real good. You a top? Oh good! You gonna have fun tonight! You need some rubbers? I got some here in my purse! Got my flask too if you want some vodka! Girl I never leave the house without it!

Sound bite #4: A drag queen proposing post club activities.

DRAG QUEEN: GURL you meeting us at the diner? I need my bacon and eggs. Maybe some biscuits and gravy. Get some cream with that meat! haha Mmmm! Well come on gurl! The other queens are waiting on us… They better not give our table away. I’m gonna kick some ass if they do! (walk off stage)

DJ: AND NOW FOR A SPECIAL PERFORMANCE OF THE EVENING!

EVERYBODY WELCOME SAMSON AS HE TELLS YOU ABOUT THE LIFE OF AN AMATEUR DRAG QUEEN!

Confessions of an Amateur Drag Queen

I model my act off of Whitney Houston and Pink. A strange combination, but they are powerful women. Back in the day, Pink had more of an R & B sound to her voice. These days she’s turned more punk rock, but I still use that in-your-face attitude she has. “SO RAISE YOUR GLASS IF YOU ARE WRONG IN ALL THE RIGHT WAYS!” Whitney is just Whitney. She doesn’t really have to be in your face because her beauty,
her elegance already exudes power. She has a lot of variety in her music, too. I can
perform more upbeat songs of hers like “Queen of the Night” or her love ballads like “I
Always Love You.” And girl, you know we all gotta a fella or two we think of when we
sing that song.

I started doing drag when I was 19 years old. I’m still new at this. Some people
who do drag get really intense. They have work done and shit. I mean I know some of
them are in the middle of transitioning. But we all don’t want to be women. I like my
penis just fine!

No the satisfaction I get from drag is that it makes me feel like I can be anybody I
want to be. You can be the biggest flirt or the biggest bitch, and everybody thinks you are
fucking hilarious and they love you! They love you no matter what! That’s what I like
about doing drag.

And once you do it, you can’t stop. It’s a high! I knew I wanted to do drag the
first time I saw a drag performer. I’m 18. In a gay club back home in Atlanta. I’m sipping
my frozen Cosmo and there she is. Alexis. This beautiful Latin beauty with long black
hair and wearing a white dress with matching boots. Jennifer Lopez’s “Let’s Get Loud”
starts playing. I am just completely in awe and she shakes her hips back and forth to the
beat. And I think to myself, I want to do that! I want to be her!

After the show, I find her. I can barely speak. “I. Just. Love. You.” And then as I
soon as I start talking, it’s like verbal diarrhea. I gush and gush and gush. She just smiles
and nods slowly.

I tell her, “I want to get into this business. Can you help me?”
And she’s like, “How bad do you want this? You can’t just get up here and put on a dress. Can you dance?”

And I’m like, “Well not professionally. I’ve got some moves.”

And she says, “Can you sing? At least lip sync?”

And I say, “Yeh.” And then she says, “Do you know how to walk in heels?”

And I’m like, “Uh-oh. Sure don’t. And she’s like, “Baby, I will help you. But we got some work to do now!”

She becomes my diva mentor, teaching me the ropes of drag performance. After months of work, I almost disappointed her. On the night of my first performance, I am nervous as fuck. Thought I was going to puke my guts out. I’m standing there looking at myself in the mirror holding my wig in my hands with sweat rolling down my forehead. “I can’t do this.” My mentor yells from behind me, “Bitch! Don’t you quit on me now! You’ve worked too hard to quit! You know you want to do this! You were BORN to do this!” So I put my wig back on, put on my high heels, and I walked out on that stage and performed the best damn act I could perform. For her. For myself. And for once in my life. I. Feel. Free.

DJ: ALRIGHT! EVERYBODY WELCOME BLAKE BACK TO THE STAGE FOR HIS FINAL SONG OF THE EVENING!

**Born This Way**

*(I begin assembling an imaginary cat walk.)*

Thank you, DJ! Not every gay man loves the diva. But for those of us who do—it’s a special experience. She appears on stage. Your breath catches, your heart pounds, and you are swept away. To another place. Beyond yourself. Beyond her. A place where
recognition is necessary too live, to survive. A place that disrupts male/female, gay/straight, subject/object. And in these ruptures, fractures, fissures, you feel most at home, right with the world, proud to be who you are! And you feel excitement and hope for the journey ahead. The gay man and the diva is a deliciously, bad romance! And in its scandal, its controversy. We seek refuge and resistance!

(A clip of Lady Gaga giving a speech at the 2009 National March for Equality in Washington D.C. plays. She screams, “Obama, are you listening?” I come out dressed as her and, I perform a section of “Bad Romance” and “Born This Way.”)
CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?: DIVA PERFORMANCE AS EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP

The curtain may have fallen, but the show is not over. My relationships with divas are still evolving, as are my participants’ relationships with their divas. My interpretations of diva performance spaces have changed since the beginning of this project, as do the interpretations of this space for other gay men throughout history and their own experience. Just as performance encourages fluid and emergent identities for the performer, it also encourages fluid and emergent relationships between spectator and performer. The specific performance relationship of gay men and divas evokes many emotions, and, in addition to creating a sense of the uncanny (discussed in detail in Chapter 2), the space of diva performance can be therapeutic, contested, and pedagogical. This chapter is not a conclusion or summary of this performance space but attempts to start a conversation about this complex performance relationship and notions of the therapeutic, contestation, and pedagogy. It is also a reflection on my own process of diva performance.

The chapter is divided into two major sections. In the first half, I provide observations and reconstructed dialogue on diva performance from other gay men.* This information is based on my fieldwork conducted at music venues in the Tampa Bay area.

* Pseudonyms are used for all respondents mentioned in this chapter to protect their privacy.
and written in the style of narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991). Through this data, I describe how the diva performance space is therapeutic, contested, and pedagogical. I also discuss how the relationships between divas and gay men are evolving relationships that take on different meanings throughout individual and community histories. This analysis also takes into consideration all parts of Auslander’s (2004) typology—the person, personae, and character. Please be aware that I use diva interchangeably to describe female musicians and drag queens. I argue they are both types of performances that fall under the identity category of diva.

In the second half of the chapter, I give a description of the creative process and engagement in creating my one-diva show. I highlight the importance of relational ethics in this process. I also show the necessity of performing my findings in order to adequately create with yet another audience the ongoing conversations of this research project—conversations among gay men, diva performers, and academic theorists.

Diva Performance as Therapeutic

The use of the arts for clinical healing processes has become popular in the last 50 years, specifically in the fields of music therapy and drama therapy. Music therapists Darnley-Smith and Patey (2003) write, “The elements of music are fundamental to the human condition and have the potential to be used in the pursuit of common therapeutic goals, as self-expression (individually and collectively), in communication and to enhance physical, spiritual and emotional well-being” (p. 7). The use of music therapy spans a vast collection of health care contexts from the treatment of Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, chronic pain, and depression (Parker & Parker, 2004). Darnley-Smith and Patey believe the therapeutic uses of music can be described through two models. One
model shows the use of music for its “inherent restorative or healing qualities”—sound, tone, rhythm, etc. The other model shows the use of music “as a means of interaction and self-expression within a therapeutic relationship” (p. 8). This resonates with my analysis of a gay man’s engagement with diva performance. The sound of a diva’s singing voice paired with the music could be healing on its own. Or, by singing with the diva a “therapeutic relationship” could be developed which could aid him in self-expression.

We can also look at how drama therapy comes into play with fan engagement. Emunah (1994) writes, “the experimentation with and embodiment of roles is at the core of drama therapy” (p. 3). She argues that drama therapy’s origins come from Moreno’s (1945) concept of psychodrama. This is where a person, with the help of a therapist, acts out his or her problems in front of a group. Emunah writes, “The enactment of life dramas implies a kind of re-living, through which both protagonist and audience experience emotional catharsis” (p. 18). Drama therapy differs a little from psychodrama in that it “utilizes far more improvisation of fictional scenes, capitalizing on the notion that to play and to pretend enables a sense of freedom and permission, and promotes expression and self-revelation, albeit obliquely” (p. 18). Gay men may achieve some kind of catharsis by not only watching a diva overcome a challenging experience but also through role playing and reliving a challenging experience of their own through her performance.

I did receive therapeutic commentary from gay men on their relationships with specific divas and their work. I classified any response related to catharsis as therapeutic. Some of this commentary related to issues of sexuality while others were more general and could apply to anyone’s engagement with diva performance. Some men found
comfort in specific lyrics of songs, while others felt a sort of friendship with a diva performer. Generally, the space of diva performance, though carrying some risks, could become a means of empowerment during or after times of turmoil.

*The Secret*

“When I was closeted, I always felt awkward making some of my music purchases at the store. It was like I was buying porn or something,” one man said. Similar to Farmer’s (2000) theory on cinephilia and gay spectatorship, a confession of diva fandom was something some gay men felt they needed to keep to themselves. Some described this relationship in terms of a guilty pleasure. Admitting diva fandom often equated coming out as gay, a symbolic marker of homosexuality. The idea was that a man must be gay if he could admire a woman that intensely without his attraction being sexual or want to emulate someone so blatantly effeminate. Another man said, “When I came out to my best friend, she said, ‘Honey! I know. What straight man would be a part of the Madonna fan club?’”

In addition, diva fandom was not always supported by intimate others in a gay man’s life. One man discussed his father’s reaction to receiving a Spice Girls album from his mother as a birthday present. “He flipped the fuck out. Said he didn’t want me listening that ‘queer shit.’ Made me throw the damn thing away.” If being the fan of a diva was confessed or if a certain performance was emulated, family members or friends would take disciplinary action. Male friends would call the fan derogatory names specifically related to a homosexual orientation. Parents would dispose of diva items (albums or garments that facilitated the child’s play) or prohibit them from singing songs of a particular artist.
In order to avoid punishment or being ostracized by peers, closeted gay men engage privately with diva performance. Similar to Farmer’s (2005) description of his love of Julie Andrews, some men described scenes of playing a diva’s music and singing along to it alone in private spaces. During these sessions, there was release from stress or worries. This space also seemed to create a temporary utopia or haven for some individuals. One man said, “After school, before my parents got home from work, I would blare Tina Turner’s ‘Proud Mary’ in my bedroom and sing along at the top of my lungs.” The diva’s voice could be loud and unwavering, a voice that many closeted men yearned for in order to be able to fully express themselves and find an “authentic” self.

After coming out, gay men felt they could express diva fandom more freely but there were still some risks associated with confessions of fandom. Since diva fandom has become such a strong cultural marker for homosexuality, gay men may still have to avoid conversations about their divas in spaces where they cannot be fully out. It is unfortunate that we live in a society where homosexuality is still stigmatized. Many individuals, both gay and straight men, are missing out on powerful performance experiences because of their associations with stigma. Everyone should be able to express his or her sexual orientations and musical tastes freely.

It is apparent in some of the following responses the power of diva performance for gay men. Whether it was through the person, personae, or character of a song, many men were able to find resonance between their experience and the experiences represented in diva performance. I soon came to see why private engagements with diva performances could be a secret utopia or safe haven.
Therapeutic Experiences

“Kelly, that girl has gotten me through some tough times,” one man said to me. We were discussing Kelly Clarkson, the first American Idol winner. I hadn’t thought of Clarkson as a diva, but men would often designate “their diva” based on shared experiences. This man said he really found resonance with her songs “Since You Been Gone” and “My Life Would Suck Without You.” The former he often listened to after a traumatic breakup and the latter when he found love again. He also said, “Kelly isn’t this stick figure that we are bombarded with, but she is still gorgeous to me. Makes me think that I can still be sexy even though I’m on the bigger side.” This could point to some of Gross’s (2000) argument that contemporary gay male culture pressures men to have “better than average bodies.” There is also an engagement with all three components of Auslander’s typology.

In fact, not only did gay men choose divas based on common experiences, but they found strength in being able to fully immerse themselves emotionally in experiences narrated by song. For instance, one man discussed Wynonna Judd’s “No One Else on Earth” as aiding him in terminating a relationship brought on by instances of infidelity. One man confessed to me that Celine Dion’s “All By Myself,” helped him get through his frustrations with being single. He said, “While the song is about being alone, there’s a part at the end where she yells that she does not want to be alone anymore. I love that part! It gives me a rush and I will wail along.” Whether it was a time of loneliness, heartbreak, illness or death, gay men made their own personal connections to the songs and their divas even if the connection was not part of the song’s original meaning. The lyrics of the song and the emotionality of her voice brought forth a catharsis.
For instance, one gay man discussed another Dion hit “Taking Chances.” He said, “I know it’s about taking chances on love, but I think for me it was about taking chances to come out. It’s like she was talking directly to me.” One man talked about Cher’s “Song for the Lonely.” He said, “I love it when she sings about us hearing the prayer and knowing that there is always someone there for you.” The diva performance provided a message gay men could take in. A message that gave them voice—a voice they often wanted, but felt they could not have before because of masculine and heterosexist norms on the expression of emotion.

*Loving Female Relationships*

Others discussed the diva’s performance and how this reminded them of special women in their lives and the experiences they shared with these women. The women were often close family members who had either helped them through the coming out process or who were admired for their strength. One man talked about how Better Midler reminded him of his favorite aunt. “She was the first person I came out to. When I told her, she said, ‘Everybody comes out to me! Do I look like Cher or something?’ And I thought, ‘No, Bette Midler!’ Always funny as hell…a little too down on her looks at times but she always laughed it off.”

Some men talked about how diva performances reminded them of times they shared with their mothers. One man said, “My first concert was Cyndi Lauper with my mom. We had such a good time.” One man talked about watching divas in country music videos with his mother late at night before bed. An appreciation for diva performances was something that was shared between mother and son—with the mother guiding cultural tastes. This is similar to Farmer’s (2000) argument that gay fantasy comes from
maternal identification. Some scholars worry that theorizing gay identity maternally may provide a tool for pathologizing homosexuality (emphasizing theories about the absent father and domineering mother). I believe that by bringing in this discussion of spectatorship we could potentially queer models of sexual maturation and development. This disrupts patriarchal hegemony. Cultural representations of male childhood do not have to be limited to a young boy playing catch with his father. Maybe we can have an image of a young boy listening to music with his mother. Hopefully, this will encourage more alternative representations of parent/child relationships and queer models of childhood development.

In fact, it seems diva performance facilitates language play among gay men as a way to subvert patriarchal hegemony. One evening at the karaoke bar I told a gay man that I would be singing one of Carrie Underwood’s songs. He looked at me sternly and said, “Don’t fuck it up. She’s my wife you know.” Then we both laughed because we knew for multiple reasons that this was obviously not the case. The patriarchal ideology that men should grow up and marry women to procreate is disrupted in this one simple instance of engagement with diva performance.

Diva performances seem to remind gay men of the respect they have for important women in their lives. These are women in which they shared important cultural and personal experiences. These are women they learned important lessons from growing up. These are women who they felt always supported them. Kostenbaum’s (1993) writes, “The diva overturns the world’s gendered ground by making femaleness seem at once powerful and artificial; and so the diva has often been associated with ruptures in the earth” (p. 104). When women are in charge, the world should listen. We should take
notes when the diva (musician, mother, aunt, mentor) teaches us how to dance and sing outside of the sexual binaries that confine us.

**Diva Performance as Contested**

While the space of diva performance was therapeutic for many men, I also found it to be contested in terms of what it expresses about gay male identity. Gross’s (1999) description of the struggle between masculine and feminine symbols for gay culture became more apparent when discussing divas. Also, there were debates about what made a female musician a diva. While the diva performance space caused conflict among gay men, I do not think it was ever detrimental to social bonds within the gay community. Rather, I think it served as a space that sparked constructive dialogue about sexual orientation, gender identity, and performances of attractiveness and desire among gay men.

“I’m No Queen!”

When conversing with gay men about divas, I ran into three specific groups. There were men who were very passionate fans. They had their own “divas” they related to, and they knew much of the information about their divas’ lives and work. These were reminiscent of Kostenbaum’s (1993) “opera queens.” There was the group of gay men who had apathetic feelings toward divas. They might have enjoyed a diva’s music, but they did not relate to her life. Finally, there was the group of men who I coined the “diva fan rejects.” They expressed feelings of distaste for the diva fan rather than the divas themselves. To these men, the diva fan was seen as fueling stereotypes or a threat to a gay man’s assimilation into traditional masculine roles.
“I don’t really get into all that stuff. I’m no queen,” one man told me when I asked him about diva performances. One night, after talking with a man about being a fan of Britney Spears, his partner interrupted our conversation. Rolling his eyes he said, “Oh geez, there he goes with his Britney obsession again!” Even though his partner was joking about this, I think this Spears fan was somewhat hurt. This and other instances in the field showed continuing debate within the gay community on gay identity and expressions of masculinity and femininity.

I was also astounded at how stigmatized drag performance was for some gay men. I remember telling a man about my show and how I would potentially be participating in drag performance. He said, “Wait, do you do that as a profession?” When I told him I did not perform in drag as a profession he responded, “Oh, good because I don’t think I could date you.” When I asked him why this would be the case, he responded, “When a man is that feminine, it’s just a turn off for me.” Another man said one night, “Drag queens and male dancers just freak me out. It’s just not natural.” Unfortunately, it appears that some gay men become susceptible to heternormative ideologies of gender even within the gay community. There are identity politics within identity politics. The heterosexual matrix continues to work its way into the community.

However, I do not believe these men are a lost cause. Starting and sustaining meaningful conversation is the key to ending some of these assumptions, which is precisely why projects like these are born. Biological sex, gender, and sexuality are still all too often collapsed together. I think it’s important to attempt to change the minds of these “diva fan rejects.” How are we going to ever achieve queer equality if we have individuals in the minority who still hold such rigid worldviews? I wonder what one of
these men would think if they had listened to the same conversation I had with a drag queen. This entertainer had been performing for over 25 years. “I have had relationships with men and women. I identify as a man, but I do drag. I have never wanted to change my sex,” she said to me. Diva performances encourage queer visions of the world, and hopefully in time these “diva fan rejects” can catch a glimpse of light before it’s too late.

“She’s Not a Diva!”

“Katy Perry is not a diva!” James yells.

It is 3AM on a Saturday morning, and I am devouring cold pizza, a weekend tradition. My friends and I go out to a club, watch some drag performances, dance, and end the night at this pizza place. This conversation around Katy Perry sparks because one of my friends is complaining about her song “Firework.” He feels that it is overplayed. We have a discussion about the interpretation of the song. I feel that this is a golden opportunity to interrogate “diva” as identity marker.

“Why is she not a diva?” I ask.

“She’s too pop-y,” he responds.

“What does that mean?”

He continues, “Well, she’s too girly. ‘Firework’ is her only song that is actually about serious issues. All her other songs are about getting wasted and stuff.”

Another one of my friends, Conor, chimes in, “She’s not really outrageous enough to be a diva.”

I continue, “So, what about some of these other current pop musicians like Pink and Britney Spears? Are they divas?”

The questions make them pause for a moment. Conor says, “I think they both
could potentially have the same effects of past divas. Their music can make you feel powerful, but they aren’t like the classic divas. Their voices aren’t very strong. They just aren’t very big.” My friend does not mean big as a descriptor for body size, but rather a descriptor for having a bold personality. In fact, the question of who could be classified as a diva came up frequently during my fieldwork. There was some agreement on which women could be classified as music divas.

Many men agreed on those women who were largely represented in pop culture as divas including Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, Cher, Celine Dion, Madonna, and Whitney Houston. Many female artists of color were considered divas too including Diana Ross, Tina Turner, Janet Jackson, Beyonce, Rihanna, Jennifer Lopez, and Gloria Estefan. In fact, there was less disagreement on the status of diva among performers of color than white performers. This seemed to reaffirm theories on feminism and intersectionality. Perhaps the status of diva marker among performers of color was less questioned because these women were able to persevere through multiple obstacles (sexism and racism). This potentially increased their appearances of strength and confidence in performance for gay men.

However, those female musicians who were considered “too pop” often did not fall into the diva category for gay men even though they had strong significance in their lives. These musicians often fit stereotypical heterosexual and submissive roles—specifically the role of the “nice girl.” Some of these performers included Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, Carrie Underwood, and Katy Perry. These women were all in their twenties to early thirties. If the performer had any association with Disney, this also counted against their diva status. Overall, if the female musician appeared weak and
did not defy stereotypically passive feminine roles, than most gay men would not consider her a diva. The more resistive her gender performances, the higher diva status she acquired.

Of course, agreement on the diva status of a few female musicians seemed split among gay men. This was often the case when comparing Madonna and Lady Gaga. “She [Lady Gaga] clearly copied some of ‘Like a Prayer’ when she used religious symbolism in her ‘Alejandro’ video,” one man said. Many felt that Gaga’s new song “Born this Way” was too similar to Madonna’s 1989 hit “Express Yourself.” To some men, this showed a lack of originality. However, some men thought Gaga was extremely creative. “She’s a true performance artist. She does a lot of strange shit, but I think every decision she makes has an activist purpose,” said one man. Another said, “Sometimes I just watch her shows, and I think what the fuck? But, I usually get it eventually.”

Britney Spears’s status as a diva was also contested. “Of course she’s a diva. She is so hot! She knows how to get what she wants,” one man said. “Britney is so slutty, and all of her songs are just about fucking now. She has really gone down hill in her career,” another man said. In one sense, she was considered a diva because she defied passive feminine roles by being hypersexual. However, she lost diva status for some when she used her body as a means of empowerment. This contradiction can be explained, once again, through the heterosexual matrix. Gay men may respect a performer like Britney Spears for her hyper-sexuality. They may wish to be able to publicly and freely express their desire in a heteronormative society. At the same time, the heterosexual matrix perpetuates the ideology that women and their bodies are supposed to be under male control. This potentially may cause some cognitive dissonance for the gay spectator and
place the performer’s status as a diva up for debate. Of course, gay men are often stereotyped as being promiscuous. This can create negative feelings around sexual exploration because it is a way for the community to continue to be stigmatized.

In summary, it seemed that diva status of a female musician was debated when either a.) She did not actively defy gender norms and/or b.) There was a lack of creativity in her work. One gay man may feel that a particular female musician was creative while another may not. One gay man may feel that a particular musician did not defy gender norms while another did. This is why the diva status of one female musician could be debated. Ultimately, diva status was defined when the female musician could empower the men through pedagogical performances whether they were related to creativity, authenticity of self, or gender performance subversion.

While who counted as a diva was debated, what a diva’s performance could teach gay spectators was not. In the next section, I will move away from therapeutic discussions of performance. I will describe how diva performances inspire political activism and teach gay men ways to feel more secure in their identities.

**Diva Performance as Pedagogical**

I have previously argued that the identity construct of “diva” blurs the line between masculine and feminine gender norms. In this section, I discuss how diva performance can teach gay men how to enact disidenitifactory (Munoz, 1999) performances in the everyday. These performances not only defy dominant ideologies of gender, but they work on and against these ideologies. Furthermore, commentary from participants showed profound admiration for the ease in which divas could gender bend. Finally, I discuss how diva performances are historical markers that serve to narrate the
story of the gay and lesbian movement through the creation of appropriated and
originally intended gay anthems.

*Teach Me How to “Dis”identify, Gurrrel: Gender Bending 101*

“Oh, my gosh! There he is!” My friend Nathan yells.

We are at a gay dance club in St. Petersburg, FL. We are waiting to get our drinks
at the bar when my friend becomes so excited I think he is going to faint.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“It’s him! Niki James!”

“Who’s that?”

“He’s a drag queen. I can’t believe you don’t know him! He’s performing
tomorrow! I’m going to go say hi.”

I watch my friend go over and make a friendly exchange with the drag queen
outside of drag attire. When he returns, I ask him, “Why do you like this performer so
much?”

“He’s just so raw and gritty. He’s so masculine that I could never picture him in
drag. He does such a good job though! We have to see him tomorrow,” Nathan responds.

In that moment, Nathan was admiring this performer’s gender bending
capabilities. As I stood looking at this man, I agreed with my friend that I would never
think he did drag performance. Underneath his muscle T-shirt I saw tattoos all over his
bulging arms. He was balding. Most male performers I had previously seen outside of
drag had more feminine features. I had never seen one so “edgy” as Nathan described
him (edgy can be synonymous with rough, gritty, alternative, etc.)
In fact, I would often receive this type of response from gay men while watching drag shows. They would comment on how well the drag performer resembled a certain female musician (“She looks so much like Cher!”) Sometimes the men had fun trying to guess which musician the performer was emulating. The performer was admired if he did a good job at passing as the other sex and/or a specific performer.

Conversely, some male performers were not admired by how well they passed as the other sex, but how they used humor in showing they were not women—that an essential gender was a fabrication. One gay man told me, “I get frustrated with some of the drag queens of today. They are so concerned with trying to emulate a female musician that they get away from the campy style of drag. It’s a generational thing I think.” However, I did observe some campy styles of drag. One drag performer would occasionally drop the register of his voice very low like a man in the middle of an act. This same performer would often make jokes about his penis accidentally popping out from underneath his dress. One night he said, “My dick is so big, I got to tape it down. It feels like I am fucking myself in the ass!” I saw a drag performer take out his fake implants and juggle them in the air. One purposely let part of his wig fall off during a performance. One drag performer acted as a ventriloquist and pretended another performer was a dummy, mouthing words from behind him. Campy styles of drag still exist, but they may not be as prevalent as they once were. Or, it may be that camp styles are being reserved for off stage or “hosting” discourses and utilized outside of a drag queen’s engagement with audiences during songs.

Regardless, Butler’s (1999) theories on acts of gender parody came to life for me in my fieldwork. Gay men admired the drag queens because they were either skilled at

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gender performance deception or they facilitated a space to laugh at gender performance. The idea of an essential gender became a joke. As I watched gay men flirt with the queens by provocatively slipping them tips, I realized that the drag queens that performed in my field sites were the best “comediennes” of this inside joke. Drag queens encourage us to laugh at and have fun with the gender binaries that often times confine us.

In fact, I see this type of play in everyday instances of my own life. When I greet my male friends with a “hey girl, heyyy!” or when I give someone a swift finger snap, I do not think that these behaviors are feminine or masculine. They may have been appropriated from a feminine source. However, they are not being used in this instance to express any type of gender. Rather, these behaviors are used to show confidence and camaraderie. The term “girlfriend,” part of what I refer to as “divaspeak,” is an expression of love and male bonding. This is in direct opposition to the use of “girl” as a naming device traditionally among men, where it is often used as an insult. These behaviors, performances, not only defy particular gender norms, but they work on and against (Munoz, 1999) these norms as well.

Many scholars have analyzed disidentifying performances in popular culture. However, I am arguing that diva performance is not only a disidentification of and with traditional gender norms, but that it also teaches others how to enact disidentifying performances in the everyday. Some may argue that a pop diva’s performance is not a disidentifying performance because its origins are still too situated within a heterosexist frame. While this may be the case, I would argue that the pedagogical potential of disidentifactory performances still exist within this frame. Lady Gaga’s performance may not be as powerful as that of drag performance artist Vaginal Crème Davis. However, she
is more easily accessible, and I think this strengthens her pedagogical possibilities. She provides an “introductory course” in gender bending or disidentificatory performance. Her performance is eccentric enough without being overwhelming. Sometimes while engaging in disidentificatory performances, performers place too much emphasis on shock value before illuminating the very power structures that press on these performances.

And it appears that diva performers are beginning to understand their pedagogical capabilities. Not only are they gender bending during live performances, they are also beginning to incorporate activist messages in their songs. In the next section I describe how, through the use of songwriting, certain female performers are being explicitly labeled gay activists and how this is affecting their fans’ lives.

**Historical Markers and the Creation of Gay Anthems**

A diva’s performance can help educate individuals about historic events in the gay and lesbian liberation movement. (ie. Judy Garland and the Stonewall Riots, Madonna and representation of HIV/AIDS in the 80s, and, currently, Lady Gaga and the campaign to end bullying). Their performances can spark memories of historic events, thereby furthering the story of the movement. They can facilitate conversations across generations of gay men. They can aid in educating the younger generation of men about what work previous generations have accomplished. They can help older generations of gay men understand some of the current struggles younger gay men are facing now. I believe pop music divas are beginning to understand the pedagogical implications of their work. This is apparent in the formulation of gay anthems. In the past, gay men have appropriated songs performed by music divas for their own purposes. Some examples
include Diana Ross’s “I’m Coming Out,” Judy Garland’s “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” The Weathergirl’s “It’s Raining Men,” These songs may or may not have been written with homosexuals in mind.

However, contemporary female pop artists are beginning to explicitly address gay activism in their songs. When writing songs, I believe they are intentionally creating gay anthems. For instance, Katy Perry’s “Firework” has become a popular gay anthem. This song takes a more serious tone from her previous album’s top hit “I Kissed a Girl.” “Firework,” Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way,” and Ke$sha’s “We Are Who We Are,” were all popular songs in the dance clubs I visited. I will give a brief description (through some textual analysis) of how these songs explicitly appear to be gay anthems that encourage activism.

In a recent *Rolling Stone* article (Doyle, 2010), Ke$sha stated that she wrote “We Are Who We Are” because of the recent instances of teen suicide. This includes the story of Tyler Clement, a freshman at Rutgers University who jumped off the George Washington Bridge when his roommate revealed his sexual identity. This song was also inspired by journalist Dan Savage’s It Gets Better campaign, which began in September 2010. Adults who identified as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender posted YouTube videos online about how they too had suffered through bullying as young kids. The adults then discussed how once they got older things did get better for them. Ke$sh’s song seemed to give listeners the same message. Ke$sha told the *Rolling Stone* reporter:

> Hopefully it will be an anthem for weirdos — for real people. I was really affected by the suicides that have been happening, having been subject to very public hatred [myself]. I have absolutely no idea how these kids felt. What I’m going through is nothing compared to what they had to go through. Just know things do get better and you need to celebrate who you are. Every weird thing about you is beautiful and makes life interesting. Hopefully the song really
The main chorus of the song states, “Tonight we're going hard / Just like the world is ours / We're tearin' it apart / You know we're superstars / We are who we are” (Sebert 13-17). While some may not consider Ke$ha a diva, I believe her performance of this song inspires strength in times of adversity. This song encourages performances of diva in the everyday. This song seems to say that by “tearin’ the world apart,” whether through political or resistive performances, we can become powerful.

Similarly, Katy Perry’s “Firework” music video shows multiple instances of individuals feeling ostracized. There is a young woman who is teased because she is overweight. There is a child who suffers from cancer. A young boy who strives to be a magician and a few of his peers try to beat him up in an alley. There is a scene where two young men kiss in a bar and sparks fly between them. The song and video can resonate with many people, but there are a few clues that show a direct connection to the LGBTQ community.

To begin, the fireworks she shows in her video are multicolored, symbolizing a rainbow. Lyrics of the song state, “Maybe your reason why all the doors are closed/ so you could open one that leads you to a perfect road” (Dean 28-29) and “If you only knew what the future holds/ After a hurricane comes a rainbow” (Dean 26-27). It appears that she is in some ways speaking to the LGBTQ community. Opening the “door” of the closet could lead to a perfect road. This song could potentially encourage closeted individuals to come out or transgendered individuals to live the life of the biological sex they desire.

More recently, Lady Gaga’s hit “Born this Way” also speaks directly to the
LGBTQ community. While some have criticized the song for its strong resemblance to Madonna’s “Express Yourself,” others have celebrated its explicitly activist message. There is a resistance to religious discrimination when she says, “It doesn’t matter if you love him or capital H. I. M. Just put your paws up because you were born this way” (Germanotta 1-3). Throughout the song she talks about loving yourself because you were born the way you are. In the final portion, she specifically addresses the LGBTQ community. She says, “Don’t be a drag/Just be a queen” (Germanotta 27). This line plays with the category of drag queen. I believe one could interpret it as stating, “Do not give into the pressure of gender conformity. Flaunt your flamboyance or femininity!” Another line states, “No matter gay, straight, bi, lesbian, transgendered life/ I’m on the right track/ Baby, I was born to survive” (Germanotta 48-51). The message of this line could be interpreted as stating that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, should not have to live in fear. Everyone deserves the right to feel secure in his or her own skin.

These songs suggest that relationships with divas and diva performances are changing. Hopefully, this is symbolic of the need for gay activism in this country. Gay men are no longer just reveling in the hyper-emotionalism of a diva performance. They are being pushed to action. The diva seems to be saying to her fans, “I don’t want my music to just heal you. I want it to inspire you to go out in the world and fight for equal rights.” In these instances of diva performance, we see activist inspiration from the person and her creations—not just her personae or character within a song.

And while these songs do not directly make structural or material change, at least they inspire it. These songs give those who feel like social outcasts strength in times of
adversity. They create a safe space for these individuals to explore their identities, hopes, and dreams. They inform all of us about the diversity in our world and promote acceptance and love. These songs may not end inequality and injustice over night, but they will help people survive. They may encourage individuals to reach out a helping hand to a troubled friend. These songs could potentially prevent the pulling of a trigger and the ending of a life.

Leaving the field, I had a pretty good idea about the importance of diva performance for gay men. However, it was not until I started writing and staging my show that the impact of diva performance hit home. This was when I truly began to experience the queer sublimity of diva reception.

**My Diva Performance as Life Changing Experience**

“Do you want to do a show?” my advisor asked me that day last spring when I was pitching the diva project for my thesis.

I paused for a second and let her question sink in. I had been in shows throughout my life from one-line roles to chorus members to the lead. I remembered the feelings of anxiety and pressure during the final rehearsals before the curtain would rise. However, I also remembered how excited I felt while performing and the feelings of triumph and achievement after the show.

I was faced with a major decision. I could write findings of my fieldwork in essay form or add a performance component. If I were going to discuss rends emerging from my “data,” I could see the importance of the essay form. However, the queer sublimity of diva reception is at best an embodied experience. I could report in written form what gay men said to me about how they feel when watching a diva performance, but something
would be lost. Stories are powerful in the flesh. If I performed these findings, I would not only be telling the audience about their feelings but I could *show* the audience these feelings. The stage could provide a space for marginalized voices or stories that often do not get heard. I could interact with audiences. I could be a diva.

Furthermore, I could also show the ongoing conversations among performers, spectators/fans, and academic theorists. Through performance, Butler’s theories on gender parody, Famer’s queer sublimity of diva reception, Dolan’s utopian performative and other theories could come to life. Audiences could *experience* the theories through my performances of personal narrative. By performing the research, I could be sure that at least some aspects of theory and the personal narratives could *live with* (Frank, 1999) audiences long after they exited the theatre doors.

Feeling a little intimated, I began to think about the successful researchers who performed their work that I had come across during my time in the program: Dwight Conquergood, E. Patrick Johnson, Eve Ensler, Tim Miller, Ragan Fox. Was I really able to produce a show that would be anywhere near as theoretically and evocatively powerful as their performances? Would I be able to present my findings as a seasoned performance scholar or would I appear as a struggling novice? And then I thought, *So what if you mess up a few lines here or there? So what if maybe you aren’t the best actor? At the end of this show, you can take pride in knowing that you at least tried to use performance as a tool for social change. The show may not end up being an artistic masterpiece, but you are trying to make a difference in people’s lives. Every performance artist has to start somewhere.*

That day I looked at my advisor and said, “A show? Sure. I’m in!”
The next few sections outline the creative process of the show. I first describe how I developed the setting for scenes in the show based on specific field sites. I then discuss how I developed the characters in the show. These choices were guided by autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), friendship as method (Tillmann-Healy, 2001; 2003), Stucky’s (1993) aesthetics of natural performance, and Jackson’s (1993) performance as ideological critique. I also address issues of relational ethics when including intimate others in performance and autoethnographic research. Finally, I end the chapter with a discussion of the potential activist outcomes of the show on an individual and community level.

Setting and Performance Syntax

Gaining entrée for fieldwork was not a problem. Since moving to Tampa the previous August, I had explored the various gay clubs and bars throughout the city and neighboring St. Petersburg. I was comfortable in these establishments and I knew what to expect on certain evenings as far as types of music, performances, and events. I regularly attended four sites from October through December 2010: a gay bar, a gay resort, and two gay dance clubs.

When I originally wrote the show, it was in two acts. The first act depicted scenes from my personal narrative, and the second act explored scenes from my fieldwork. One scene in the second act took place at a karaoke bar that was based on one of the field sites, a local gay bar that hosted karaoke nights. Mostly large groups of gay men patronized this bar. Sometimes there were a few females in the group, but the majority of
patrons were gay men. There were themed nights every day of the week. I mostly observed on Wednesday evenings, which was one of the two karaoke-themed nights.

This site was where I engaged in the most conversations with gay men about diva fandom. The relaxed atmosphere of the bar helped facilitate conversation. I was also able to observe the choices of music selection for karaoke performances. I also engaged in diva karaoke performances myself in order to reflect on my feelings during performance and gauge reactions from the audience. When I would get behind the mike and sing, I felt that I was telling a story about myself. Every time I observed another man sing, I felt he was telling a story about his life as well.

So, when my advisor asked me to try to blend my personal narrative with the narratives of participants, I thought this site would be perfect way to frame all of the scenes of the show. I wanted the audience to be able to see that gay men other than myself experienced the queer sublimity of diva reception. I wanted to show that this was a community phenomenon reaching gay men of all different backgrounds. More stationary monologues could be performed behind the mike. Scenes that required more movement could be performed out in the space in front of the mike. The setting of the karaoke bar provided “performance syntax—ways to give connection and shape to the presentation without stifling the complexity of my fieldwork” (Jackson, 1993, p. 29). I used recordings of my own voice to serve the role of the DJ. Every time a new character was introduced, he or she was introduced to the audience through the DJ. This signaled to the audience what was coming in the show—either my own personal narrative, a story from a participant, or a scene of action.
Scenes from the show included settings from my past—my family home, a college bar, and in my car. Scenes were also constructed from fieldwork settings—an outdoor patio of one of the clubs and a dance floor of one of the clubs. My final drag scene was based on the stage in one of the dance clubs. When you entered this club, there was a bar to your right and a full dance floor straight ahead. In the middle of the dance floor was a circular platform surrounded by a guardrail. This was connected to a catwalk that led up to a main stage where drag queens would perform.

The drag queens began on the main stage and then would usually walk onto the catwalk and into the center of the dance floor on the raised platform. They would collect dollar bills from fans on the main stage and as they walked down the catwalk. When I blocked the Lady Gaga scene, I recalled experiences from watching drag shows at this club. This helped guide my movement and interaction with audience members.

In summary, I believe framing the show through the karaoke bar helped develop some coherence for the audience. The DJ’s voice served as a vocal cue to signal a dramatic monologue. When a character was not introduced, I would create the scene in front of the mike. This facilitated an overall setting for the show in which both my voice and the voice of others could be received with ease and less confusion. I think this staging worked well because it kept me physically moving. This held the audience’s attention. The stationary scenes were more dramatic while the scenes with movement were more comedic. Staging the show in this way made the scenes transition quite smoothly.
Characters As Intimate Others

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Similar to Ellis (2009), I evaluate my work on “how effectively I take the role of others and develop their characters as well as how successfully I probe and interrogate my own identity, motives, and actions” (p. 15). This show was an exercise in autoethnographic performance. I support “radical empiricism” (Jackson, 1989) where the researcher includes both his or her experiences and the experiences of participants in their work. I acknowledge that the research process is value laden, and my own personal biases always effect any interpretations of research data. The show was guided by narrative truth, rather than historical truth (Bochner, 2002). Every representation of my own personal experience and the experience of others will never be completely accurate. However, “it is important to be able to story ourselves, to have a story to tell, and to tell it as well as we can” (Ellis, p. 15). Part of being able to tell stories well as an autoethnographic researcher requires an intense focus on relational ethics. When you share your life with others, you are also giving representations of close people in your life. Sometimes people in your life do not always act in the best ways. Sometimes you do not always act in the best ways. You are not going to please everyone in their representations, but you should at least consult them on their depictions if possible.

As far as my own personal narrative, I had many issues to consider when representing intimate others. I acted as my parents in the show. Growing up, my father hated when I would experiment with gender performance. However, while he complained about these performances, he never punished me for them. I had to present my father as a
man who did not understand his son and not one who abused his son. In most situations, I
highly recommend showing those you write about your work. Ellis (1995) has discussed
at length the ethical dilemmas she faced when bringing work back to the participants in
the Fisher Folk community involved with her dissertation. Some of these individuals
were angry with Ellis even though she did not alter the descriptions of anything they said
or did. She developed deep friendships with many of these community members and felt
great pain when she returned to the field and found many of them extremely angry with
her. Sometimes participants will react negatively to your work even when you had the
purest of intentions as a researcher.

From this experience, Ellis (1995) concludes:

My sense is that people often do make decisions similarly to the way they chose
among options for the rest of their lives, although they are constrained by current
ethnographic practices and social science training. In the same way we decide to
conduct fieldwork by thinking about how we conduct the rest of our lives, we can
learn about the rest of our lives by examining how we act and think in fieldwork
settings. (pp. 89-90)

Taking into the account the lessons of her experience, I decided not to show my father
this show for several reasons. He is still getting used to me being gay. He does not
approve of men dressing in drag, and I think had he seen the show this would have
pushed us farther apart. Also, I didn’t want him to think that I felt mistreated growing up.
There is a possibility in the future that I may show him this work. For now, I feel that I
should not to keep the relationship stable and healthy. I will need to further interrogate
these feelings and try to foresee how my engagement in drag performance may impact
our relationship.
Also, I had to represent my friends I first came out to and my friend Michelle who sold her dress to a drag queen. Even though there wasn’t really anything threatening their reputations, I still made sure that these individuals knew about their parts in the show. I still keep in touch with my friends from college. They were thrilled about the show and accepted the comedic way in which I portrayed the scene. Michelle actually suggested that I write the scene about her selling the dress.

I had even more of a responsibility representing the conversations I had with my friends who inspired the other monologues in the show. The staging of these narratives was an exercise in natural performance that “involves engagement in the artistic re/performance of something which was, at first performance, an ordinary event” (Stucky, 1993, p. 168). Natural performance is neither an exact replica of reality nor a mere imitation. There is some flexibility for artistic choices, and they require a special kind of embodiment where a “text emerges from and is constituted in a body; the subsequent performance also resides in a body” (p. 171). The performer, through careful scrutiny, takes in an outer world in order to become the other. This “taking in” is a creative act where “the performer constructs a necessary fiction and generates a subjective response” (p. 172). In order to successfully become the other and make the performance of the “inside world out” believable, the performer must pay attention to specific details of conversation (issues of vocalization-register, pauses, dialects, accents, etc. and speaking environment). It is important to not only consider what people say but how they say it in order to put the audience back in the original scene and connect them more intimately with the character.
In order to present successful natural performances, I utilized aspects of Tillmann-Healy’s (2001; 2003) friendship as method. The aesthetic of natural performance and friendship as method are often not juxtaposed in research, but I found combining them very helpful in writing the show. Friendship as method does not require that you be friends with your participants but that “you approach respondents from a stance of friendship, meaning we treat them with respect, honor their stories, and try to use their stories for humane and just purposes” (p. 745). She suggests that you spend at least a year in the field. Due to the time constraints of a thesis project, I did not have a full year to do fieldwork. While I did begin many friendships with respondents in the field (friendships I hope will be helpful in continuing this work into other projects), I had not developed enough of a friendship with most to feel comfortable with representing them as characters with full monologues in my show.

Therefore, I decided to stage monologues based on interviews with established friendships in the field. There was already a level of trust between researcher and participants. I had known both participants before the project began. They were both familiar with my type of work. We were all in the same social network, which consisted of mutual friends that they both had known for several years. I believe all of these aspects of the friendships made interviews more relaxed and informal. I knew their personalities well, and this was extremely helpful in “becoming the other” for my final performances. Both participants were comfortable with discussing creative staging choices, and I consulted them about artistic choices that were made in the representations of their stories.
In fact, I began to see that the show became a collaborative process where our friendships were stronger not in spite of the process but along with the process (Tillmann-Healy, 2001). For example, I met Samson through my friend Nathan. They are best friends, and they will often visit each other throughout the year. On one evening of fieldwork, we had all just finished watching a few drag performances, and Samson needed to take a smoke break on one of the outdoor patios. While talking about the performances, Nathan asked me if I knew Samson did drag performance. I told him about my project. He was very interested in the project and he began to tell me about why he did drag and how he started doing performances. Before I knew it, with his consent, I had one of my foundational monologues for the show.

When Samson first told me about his experiences that night, he was not in drag. I specifically chose to perform his monologue not in full drag for this reason. It helped put the audience and me back in the original setting of the interview. I felt this would facilitate a better emotional connection with the audience. After showing the montage of sound bites from the scene “Nights of Diva Debauchery,” I also felt that it was important to present this performer in a completely vulnerable state. It was important to show that behind the loud and brash comments of the drag queen is a human being who has specific personal desires and reasons for performing.

In fact, Samson was very happy that his story could be shared. I told Samson that he had earned the title of my diva mentor. I continue to consider doing drag professionally, and he advises me on the process. I asked if he would share a response to the show with me, and he was happy to oblige. Here is the response via email:

I just wanted to express how happy and excited I was to be a part of this project. I was very excited to share my experiences with Blake and advise him on the
positives and the negatives of performing as a drag queen. It can be a rough business where a lot of people judge you for it. I think it is so great that school projects like this exist. There are so many people that have no idea what being a drag queen is all about. Projects like this would really spread awareness that performing in drag is not a freak show but that it's fun and exciting. For me doing drag is being a different person...its acting. You can be anyone you want to be and doing drag really allows you to be that person you always wanted to be. You can be a bitch or funny or dramatic. I hope to continue to see projects like this in existence to help the world become more welcoming and accepting of the drag community and more importantly the gay community (S. Darnell, personal communication, March 2011).

Samson’s description of becoming another person highlights how diva performance promotes emergent identities as relational achievements. When he performs in drag, he uses characteristics of both Whitney Houston and Pink. These performances combined with his own unique performance create a new “bitchy,” “funny,” or possibly more “dramatic” sense of self for Samson. This sense of self lingers with him in the privacy of his home. “I will sometimes walk around the house in high heels and my wig,” he told me recently. “It makes me feel good.”

I met Darren through my best girlfriend in Tampa. She and Darren were best friends in college and he comes to visit us in Tampa. We’ve become good friends. He is still closeted at home, and his visits often provide him with a safe space to talk about his struggles and be able to freely explore gay nightlife. Before this project, he had spoken with me about being in an abusive relationship. It was something he mentioned, but he never really went in to too much detail. One evening at the karaoke bar, I decided to perform one of Cher’s songs, “Strong Enough.” Afterwards, while having breakfast at a nearby diner, he opened up to me about the significance of that song in his life. This show provided a way for me to come to understand his experience of abuse better and his issues with coming out.
I wanted to make sure he was comfortable with me using his story as a monologue. I had not predicted that our discussion on his appreciation for Cher would have led to such turbulent topics. So, I had to take off my social scientific lens and really reflect on the situation. Having never been in an abusive relationship, I wondered how it would feel to have a story of abuse shared with others. Would I want other people to know what I had gone through? At one point, I thought that his story was too personal and I hesitated to ask him to discuss it with me more. But then I wondered if sharing his story, making it a part of the show, would be helpful in some way to Darren.

So, I explained to him that I found his story compelling and I thought it would be important to share it because I believe that people often do not think about abuse in same sex relationships. I also told him that I could change his name for the character and change details of the events in case he was worried about his privacy and the privacy of others involved in his situation. Darren seemed enthusiastic about his part in the project, and he gave me permission to write the monologue. While writing, I wanted to make sure I provided enough but not too much detail on the abuse. I wanted him to appear as a survivor, not a victim. After finishing the scene, I emailed it to him. I told him that he could make any suggestions and that I would change or omit any information he requested.

After about an hour of intense anxiety, I received a phone call. “I just love it,” he said. “It made me cry, but in a good way.” I was very pleased that he approved of the monologue. I told him that I thought it was brave of him to allow me to share his story, and that he was helping bring awareness for those who are trapped in situations of domestic abuse. After the show, I received this response from him via email:
I just wanted to thank you again for including my personal "diva" experience in your show. I was not only honored to be a part of the show's storyline, but it created a different outlook on the pain I went through in my past relationship, that you included during your highlight of Cher's influence in the gay community. I absolutely admire her music and feel a connection to her songs as they relate to experiences I've gone through. This is where "Strong Enough" came in. This opportunity to share my story with the show's audience made me realize something: maybe there was someone in the audience who was in my situation, going through the same pain I went through, and feeling lost and ashamed. Instead of keeping my story silent and swept under the rug, I was able to share it and potentially save that someone else from a similar struggle. On a personal note, the opportunity to open up to you about this dark part of my romantic history that I've kept a secret from so many people has brought us closer together as friends. It's allowed you to understand me for who I am, and the stronger person I've become. Once again, thank you so much! Best of luck with your thesis! (D. James, personal communication, March 2011)

Darren’s scene in the show was a very powerful experience for both of us. I was so relieved that he approved of my performance. His story provided a space for many silenced voices to be heard that night. Again, we see diva performance encouraging emergent identities as relational achievements. After every engagement with Cher’s performances, it appears that Darren was changed in some way. He was a more confident person—confident in his decision to leave an abusive relationship and confident in being in is own skin.

The character of Robert was constructed much differently than the other two. This character was based on a merging of conversations that I had with men who were fans of country music divas. Since this character was developed from more informal field conversations, I had to find a balance in the details. I needed to change names and locations in order to protect the privacy of participants. At the same time, I did not want to change so much information that the character lost his purpose. For instance, Tennessee, the state where Robert grew up was just one of the locations of origin for
these participants. These men had all brought up country divas such as Martina McBride, Trisha Yearwood, and Gretchen Wilson (among others) in conversation. I constructed connections between the artists’ songs and the experiences I heard in the field about engagement with diva performances—experiences such as the loss of a mother, lessons on love and dating, and troubled relationships with parents.

In addition, I was able to implement performance as a mode of ideological critique (Jackson, 1993) while constructing this character. In order to critique the audition process, Jackson created a character based on several directors she had interviewed. She describes scripting as a mode of inquiry into fieldwork and writes:

> The form of the script allowed me to connect the experiences of my respondents without initially divesting them of their individuality. More significantly, it provided a flexible space in which themes and interpretations developed through association and juxtaposition, allowing me an alternative way to discover what it was I had to say and what it was I wished to critique. (p. 26)

In my fieldwork experience, I met gay men from many parts of the country. They were mostly from the state of Florida, the Northeast, or small, rural areas of the United States. Coming from a rural area myself, I know I have had some cultural adjustment from the Midwest to Florida. I thought it would be beneficial to provide a character that would speak to the experience of gay men from small rural areas. I felt the character of Robert could be a critique of certain gay stereotypes, including the idea that all gay men are feminine or what I call “urban chic.” I consider urban chic to be synonymous with the term metrosexual (Simpson, 1994): men who are middle to upper class, clean cut, have disposable incomes, live and work in the city, and follow all of the latest fashion trends. I wanted audience members to see diversity in representations of gay men and diva fandom. I wanted them to see that the queer sublimity of diva reception was not just
experienced by gay men in the city who have more access to drag shows or music
concerts. I also wanted the representation of Robert to acknowledge some of the unique
challenges of gays and lesbians in rural areas (Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Smith &
Mancoske, 1998) and encourage the audience to think about how diva performances may
influence their lives different than those living in a metropolitan area. I also believe this
caracter highlighted the importance of country divas and how they are sometimes
neglected in academic scholarship and popular culture.

In summary, I enjoyed the process of writing and staging the show. Receiving
feedback from friends decreased my anxiety about performing their stories. It was also
rewarding for them to know that their stories were being heard. Tillmann Healy (2003)
writes, “Friendship as method all but demands that writings be taken back to the
community for examination, critique, and further dialogue” (p. 744). Obviously, I know
that not every man I spoke with was able to see the finished product live. I did recognize
some men from the field in the audience, and I had individuals who were not a part of the
project approach me after the show as well. Many audience members said they found
resonance with the characters’ stories. I received two beautifully written responses from
gay men in the audience:

I personally have never been a big Diva follower. I like Cher and Bette, but more
for the message of their music. A big song for me is Gloria Gaynor's "I Am What
I Am". Music is a mode of communication that allows for conversations that
others may not be willing to hear any other way. While I loved the performance,
it was not due to the Diva connection, but rather the personal stories. Whether a
person identifies as gay, straight, or something in-between, I think we can all
recall moments of feeling trapped in some type of liminal space, trapped in some
type of performance of identity, some type of self imposed prison where we want
desperately to escape, but fail to realize that we can only escape by being honest
with ourselves. The show evoked those struggles in my own life of not
belonging, not being loved, of feeling so isolated because of your own personal
struggles that you are drowning in a sea of people. Your performance made me
cry and laugh, but mostly cry. On a more personal note, I would love to work with you sometime in some type of performance, perhaps a performance of gay identity across a generational divide. Thanks for putting yourself out there. (D. Powe, personal communication, April 2011)

The performance, to use a total cliche, made me laugh, and made me cry. I saw the struggle of different people coming to terms with their own identities, which as a gay man, I could obviously relate to. We are called upon to sometimes change our identities on-the-fly, at any given moment. What do we show? What do we hide? When? And to whom? Your performance told me the story of a man who was able to channel his inner diva in order to find a safe place, far from the world of judgment, critique, anger, oppression. When you were up there performing, singing, the performance within-a-performance, I thought it was a brilliant representation of the layers of identity so many of us have to wear. It made me happy to see you happy there. Such a fun, bright, vibrant, positive place to be, to "escape" to. But at the same time, you layered the performance well, We also saw that there still exists in society a reason that we need safe places like the world of the on-stage diva to escape to. For that reason, the performance made me sad. Your story wasn't just yours, it belongs to many, many people. It was important work and it was both enjoyable and thought-provoking on many levels. To simply say "I enjoyed it" really doesn't do justice to how it made me feel. (J. Brown, personal communication, April 2011)

While the level of diva fandom varied among them, both men seemed to understand the diva performance space as therapeutic, contested, and pedagogical. In the first response, we see the man hesitate in identifying himself as a diva follower (contested space). Both men discuss the emotional intensity involved in diva performance and how my show represented this intensity (therapeutic space). Both men also discussed how my show highlighted the ways in which diva performances teach audiences lessons. These lessons can range from how to survive within a liminal space to how to perform your identity in potentially dangerous environments (pedagogical space). Whether it was the actual performer or the message behind her music, both men found that my diva performance was representative of the challenges they face in everyday life.

In addition, other audience members requested to collaborate on future projects.
Some people even asked if they could be interviewed about their experiences with diva performances. This is exciting because it means the show does not have to end. It can become an ongoing process (possibly into my dissertation work) that can inspire dialogue about issues facing the LGBTQ community. Luckily, I was able to have a fellow graduate student tape the show, and I can offer a taping of it. I also plan to perform the show again hopefully in venues that are largely attended by members of the LGBTQ community (including my field sites).

While I enjoyed acting as all of my characters, I did have one favorite character in the show. This was when I “transformed” into Lady Gaga during the finale. How could I not make my own diva a part of my show? The next section highlights the thrilling experience of learning how to walk the walk and talk the talk of the one and only “Mother Monster.”

**Becoming Lady Gaga**

The preparation for the Lady Gaga performance was a very jarring experience for me. I had very little experience performing in drag. I came to realize that, as Samson’s mentor said, “doing drag was not just putting on a dress and dancing.” Not only does one have to choose appropriate attire, but you also have to learn all the words of songs and craft your performance persona. This is either a direct model of the female musician or your own original persona.

During the first couple of rehearsals, I found myself lost on stage. I knew the words to the songs. I could casually dance, but I did not feel that I was fully engaged with my performance personae. So, I started watching Lady Gaga’s live performances and music videos. I analyzed the sound of her singing and speaking voice and tried to mimic
it. When she lifted up her “paws” during “Bad Romance,” I repeated the motions. I read the latest magazine and news articles about her life in order to learn more about her personality outside of performance.

One night of memorable role preparation sticks out in my mind. Classes had ended for the day and I was sitting alone in my office. I put on my Gaga costume, and I started watching her music video of “Bad Romance” and live performance of “Born this Way” at the Grammys. I found that mimicking her while in costume was also very helpful in becoming the persona. As I was watching and mimicking Lady Gaga, I felt that I was becoming her. I would then perform in front of a mirror attempting to see if my persona was believable. Just as I had done with Darren and Samson, I had to “take Lady Gaga in” so that I could perform her (Stucky, 1993). This not only required me to pay special attention to her movements and voice but also her style of clothing.

Choosing attire was somewhat challenging. Living on the budget of a graduate student made it difficult to afford an elaborate costume. With the help of my friends, I found a short black cocktail dress that appeared to be something Lady Gaga would wear. I also ordered a long blonde wig online from a costume shop and custom-made Gaga sunglasses. With any performance, you look back on it and find aspects that worked and did not work. If I had to go back and do this show again, I would perform as a drag queen in public space before performing in my show. This would have added more ethnographic detail to the performance, and I think I would have performed the scene better. However, this further explicates my argument that diva performance is an evolving relationship. I felt that I knew how to perform diva in the everyday. Drag as
diva performance was something that intrigued me, and I decide to try it. However, I was not quite comfortable enough to perform for everyone or in any space.

Surprisingly, I started to find resonance with Samson’s experiences. In drag, I felt playful and free. I felt like I could say outrageous things and exhibit outlandish behavior. There were times I felt this elated feeling, a high while in drag. As I tried on dresses in my roommate’s neighboring bedroom, I twirled around in front of her mirror. I danced and did cat walks. I do not want to sound cliché, but being in drag released the inner child who wanted to play.

Of course, I have never felt that I was trapped in the wrong body. I am happy born as a biological male. However, being able to experience the “high of drag performance” has made me wonder about the euphoria those that do want to change sex must feel when experimenting for the first time. It further made me realize the importance of providing safe spaces for transgendered individuals to be able to experiment with gender performance. Diva performance, while I argue unique for gay men, can be beneficial to all members in the LGBTQ community.

Whether individuals are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning, they will face similar challenges in life. In adolescence, as we have seen represented in the media, they may have to endure bullying from their peers. Many have survived this form of bullying and many have not. Those in the LGBTQ community can look to the diva for inspiration, and they can take solace in knowing that she too has overcome adversity. They can take in her grandiose presence, sensuous voice, and empowering songs, and have an uncanny moment of recognition—the recognition that they can survive in this world and that there are always options to take before ending a life.
Potential Activist Outcomes of the Show

Unfortunately, many individuals still feel they do not have options. People still feel that they cannot come out as LGBTQ because of unsafe environments. People still fear being discriminated against or violently harmed. People are still not being considered full citizens of the United States when they should be. I wanted this show to provide a space for marginalized voices. I also wanted the proceeds to support an organization that fights to create safe environments for LGBTQ youth. The Trevor Project, a national organization, was the first to create a 24-hour suicide prevention lifeline for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth. In addition to the lifeline, they provide educational resources for youth on their website and provide resources for educators and parents. Their vision is a world “where the possibilities, opportunities and dreams are the same for all youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity” (trevorproject.org). My hope was that my show would help further this vision.

I think it did. After the show, many people came up to me and congratulated me on my performance. While I appreciated their comments, what I enjoyed more was hearing about how the show affected them personally. One colleague, who identifies as a gay male, said, “After watching your show, I left feeling empowered. I just wanted to shake my fist in the air in victory!” Another colleague, a heterosexual female, said, “Performance often intimidates me, but after watching your show, I think I finally know what it is all about!” I donated all proceeds from the show to the Trevor Project, and I provided information on the organization in the show program.

I also distributed a questionnaire in the show program. In an attempt to explore the evolving relationship of diva performance across audience members of multiple
backgrounds I asked the following questions: How do diva performances influence your life? What does the “queer sublimity of diva reception” mean to you? Here are a few categories of responses.

**Empowerment**

As a woman and diva, I would say that performances that are crazy to some, I see these as acts of confidence and pride. These women represent a sense of empowerment for women. The power of the diva reaches to everyone even homosexuals.

I always looked up to Tina Turner and Janis Joplin, who made me feel strong and powerful. I loved how they went from ‘weird ugly girls’ to powerful, amazing women. My first concert was to see Tina Turner with my mom.

They empower me to make a positive difference and inspire me to continue pursuing my dreams. Queer sublimity of diva reception means to me the ways in which diva performances and divas subliminally influence the LGBTQ community.

Diva performances are inspiring. 😊 They pick you up when life sucks.


Diva performances make me feel powerful. Queer people can identify with divas and enter into an experience of freedom for themselves.

All types of people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, felt that diva performances could be empowering. The therapeutic dimension of diva performance was also emphasized in these responses through the use of terms like “powerful,” “inspiring,” and “freedom.” There still was a specific emphasis on women and the LGBTQ community. This suggests that diva performance does have a special place within these communities. There is a validation of unique cathartic experiences explained
earlier in this chapter. A diva’s performance may be more powerful for those in marginalized positions than for those in a privileged position.

Self-Acceptance and the Acceptance of Others

I feel divas bring individuality and originality to entertainment. Whitney was my first diva experience and then Mariah Carey. Like you, they got me through some hard times. The queer sublimity of diva reception means the life discovery of self-esteem. Peace and love for one’s self. Your story resonates with me. Great job on finding your authentic self!

Acceptances times two!

Diva performances allow you to express your inner self.

I want to find my unique identity.

Divas motivate us and give us the courage to be the people we are meant to be.

These statements suggest the diva assists in times of identity exploration. The theory of emergent identities in performance resonates with these responses. An audience member may have an idea of who they are before engaging in diva performance. Then, as soon as the diva takes the stage and begins to perform, something happens to that construction of self. Questions about that audience member’s life are answered or provoked. Desires are unveiled. The diva’s performance can change the individual, whether for the few brief minutes of a song, or long after they leave the performance space. Again, this idea of diva performance promoting emergent identities as relational achievements is highlighted in these responses. Divas relational, whether actually present or not, assist audience in their achievements of finding that “unique identity” or “inner self.” Her performance inspires us to be better people—for each other and in our own everyday lives.
Awakening


Diva performances allow me to dance and see the world in a different way.

The beautiful in our lives!

These responses suggest that diva performances encourage a re-visioning of the world. I found this encouraging due to the critique of actual structural and material improvements resulting from diva performance. Divas encourage us to look for the best in each other. Diva performances encourage us to have an optimistic outlook on life but also realize the challenges we all face and how we can help one another. Their performances allow audiences to see beauty in individuals beyond merely physical appearance. “Raw”ness,” “honesty,” courage, and humor are all synonymous with beauty in diva performances. They inspire us to revel—in feelings of joy, triumph, and relational accomplishment. After being touched by diva performances, audience members leave seeing the world a little bit differently.

Conclusion: Curtain Call

It appears that many felt the queer sublimity of diva reception that night. I felt it when I shared my stories of pain, humor, and victory. I felt it while standing on that platform, dressed like a witch, my broom in hand. I felt it belting out every note of a song. I felt it while watching Judy and Barbra sing about happy days. I felt it with every Gaga gesture and the triumphant bellow of “Rah, rah, ah ah ah! Roma, roma, ma, Gaga, ooh, la la!” (Germanotta 3-5)

That evening, I learned the most about myself than in any other life experience. My sense of self was disrupted. Multiple identities emerged through performance
creating a subjective pairing of fracture and restoration. I became whole in a gendered undoing. I performed Blake from the past. I performed Blake in the present. I performed Blake as drag queen. I performed Blake as diva. I realized that my relationship with diva performance is ongoing and evolving. Diva performance for most of my childhood had meanings of play and escapism. Diva performance as a teenager was a tool for battling my struggles with sexuality. Diva performance for me in the present has multiple meanings. It is a way to express myself as a mature young man in the academy. It is a way for me to find my voice—to sing.

And I believe that diva performance helps the gay community as a whole find its voice and sing. The relationship between diva and gay fans has evolved and will continue to change through the course of historical events. We have come a long way since the Stonewall Riots, but there is still much work to do. In the past, when the stigma of homosexuality had a sharper sting and more men had to remain in the metaphorical space of the closet, the diva may have merely provided an imaginary shoulder to cry on. Now, they not only comfort us in times of sorrow and pain, but many of them assist us in the fight for queer equality.

Whether divas are creating gay anthems, teaching us how to successfully gender bend to disidentify with dominant ideologies of gender, or validating and appreciating our existence in this world, they are here for us. Their performances bring us closer together even if sometimes they cause disagreement or controversy. Their performances remind us of our commitment to our allies (lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, straight) in the fight for queer equality. Diva performances highlight our taken for granted assumptions about gender identity in relation to sexual orientation and biological sex.
Being a gay man does not automatically make you masculine or feminine. We can find pleasure in taking on roles of various gender performances and fantasy can become reality. The relationship between divas and gay men is a historical reflection of the continuing narrative of the LGBTQ movement—informing us on how to story our own lives and the life of the community as a whole.

I will never forget this experience. When my show ended and after the audience left, I stood alone in the performance lab. I took a few moments to embrace the remnants of burnt voices, the remnants of stories, and the remnants of song. You did it, I thought. My creative vision had come to life. Fantasy was not a useless toy. It was a tool that allowed the audience, allowed me to see the beautiful possibilities of life that are right in front of us. I came on to the stage a diva. I left the theatre a diva, and I will continue to live as a diva. Judy. Liza. Babs. Bette. I will not forget you, nor will I forget how you and other divas inspire change in this world.
AFTERWORD: THE WIG

The brown wig stares at you
An invitation
A threat
To your undoing
Put it on

The wig, fake hair
The wig, symbol of reality
Of sickness
Of death
Of rebirth
The color of your mother’s locks
Which you massaged so gently

The wig
An artifact of the past
A projection of your future
Male/female
Masculine/Feminine
Life/work
Don’t be a drag, just be a queen

The wig
Takes you back to words
Words of disgust
“Why the fuck are you putting makeup on him?”
Words of love
“I’m so proud of you.”
A stage, a salon, a life
You made for yourself

Trimmings of hair
Remnants of tragedy
Are collected
Clumped together
Not disposed
But made anew
Into something unique
Something strangely familiar
Something beautiful

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The wig
The object?
The subject?
Its memories
Its queerness
Become you
S(he) becomes you
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