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Exploring Being Queer and Performing Queerness in Popular Music

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

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Abstract

For many pop artists, queer is what they do, not who they are. They perform queerness, rather than identify as queer. The research I present here suggests that popular culture's understanding of queerness relies on a heteronormative lens, whereby queerness is objectified and paraded primarily as an artistic performance. My analysis demonstrates that David Bowie's influence rests in his ability to create a space where his fans can perform queerness, without necessarily being queer. As such, Bowie's performances have come to form our expectation of what a queer performance should look like. Continuing his legacy, Lady Gaga's tribute to Bowie demonstrates her ability to not only adhere to the queer template of Bowie's, but also to defy expectations. For Gaga, queerness is both a performance and a part of her identity, making her an ideal candidate to navigate the blurred lines between performing and being queer.

I describe the consequences for the performance of being queer when popular culture's understanding of queerness has been guided only through the extreme depiction of queerness. Finally, I explore queer pop as a possible space for queer performances by queer artists to flourish. Queer pop presents an opportunity to redefine both the act of performing and being queer. In summary, through an analysis rooted in the difference between *being* and *performing*, this thesis demonstrates that popular music adheres to a heteronormative perspective that ultimately objectifies queerness and promotes an extreme version of queer performance.

Summary for Lay Audience

In popular culture, queer is the opposite of normal or mainstream. Being queer is often linked with sexual and gender identities. But for many pop music artists, queer is what they do, not who they are. They perform queerness, rather than identify with it as a sexual identity. This research suggests that popular culture's understanding of queerness relies on a mainstream view, where queerness is objectified primarily as an exaggerated performance. This objectification presents a type of queerness that has little to do with the lived experiences of the queer community, and shapes how mainstream culture comes to understand queerness. Through an analysis rooted in the difference between *being* and *performing*, this thesis demonstrates that popular music follows a mainstream perspective that ultimately objectifies queerness and promotes an extreme version of queer performance.

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Introduction

These days, we have an appetite for extremes. We demand that all our stories either end well and happily or, failing this, end catastrophically. We want a wedding, or we want someone to die tragically. Our ability to tolerate anything in between seems to have eroded. This is especially true for queer stories.¹

Queer stories have been told from many different perspectives, especially in the past decade. Popular media has been and remains at the forefront of the dissemination of queer stories in popular culture. Whether this dissemination comes in the form of television, films, theatre or music, it has become less difficult to notice or recognize queer individuals in popular culture. Popular music especially seems to have always accommodated queerness with queer artists such as David Bowie, Prince, Grace Jones, Lady Gaga, Hayley Kiyoko etc. Yet as Madeleine Morris notes, society has come to recognize queerness and queer stories only when they are presented at their extremes.² This is especially true in popular music, where we recognize queerness when it is presented as a spectacle, effectively objectifying queer lives. Popular music has preferred a type of queerness that was often hidden behind the sexual mannerisms and glittery costumes of David Bowie, or the avant-garde aesthetic of Lady Gaga. Yet, in a time when more pop music artists identify as queer, we must interrogate the space that pop music has created for the performance of queer stories.

¹ Madeleine Morris, "Foreword," in *Out Spoken: Perspectives on Queer Identities*, ed. by Jean Roberta Hillabold, Wes D. Pearce (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), 8.

² *Ibid.*

In many instances, popular music artists are not queer themselves, but use what are recognized as queer elements to deliver their performances. The performance demonstrates the relationship between popular music's interpretation of queerness and the momentary semblance of visible queerness by the musician. The distinction between *being* and *performing* queerness is crucial to the research I present here. The commodification of queer culture in popular music simultaneously disrupts and reinforces stereotypes related to queerness, demonstrating the ability for popular music to exploit queerness through lyrics, musical trends and music videos. Popular music's ability to simultaneously support the queer community and use queerness as a means to reinforce queer stereotypes is what I seek to examine. Using queer performances, pop music artists in particular are able to comment, criticize and advertise queerness, as well as emphasize queer stereotypes. I seek to interrogate the nuances in the relationship between queer and popular music. In particular, I hope to reveal that the commodification of queer culture allows popular music to mold queerness, whereby a heteronormative narrative is promoted. Simply put, popular music often objectifies queerness in order to accommodate a heteronormative perspective. This particular type of queerness is most often seen at its extremes, whereby queerness is reduced to an artistic performance, stripped of its rebellious or political stance.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I outline the critical difference between *being* and *performing* queerness. In order to understand how popular music molds queerness to fit a heteronormative perspective, I begin by detailing what popular culture expects from the performance of queerness. The focus is to explain and demonstrate the difference in queer as an identity (being) and queerness as a behaviour (performing). In the second

chapter, I use David Bowie as a case study to suggest that as an iconic model of queerness and queer performance, Bowie was emulated on such a colossal scale that his performances have been assimilated as the normative standard of queer performance. I analyze theories of normative regulation and queer performativity to demonstrate that Bowie's performance of queerness was repeated, influenced and performed to an extent where our cultural expectations of what queerness can and should be has shifted. My focus shifts to Lady Gaga in the third chapter in order to continue analyzing the evolution of queerness in popular music. Gaga's extremes denaturalize our understanding and expectations of queerness whereby normativity does not simply shift but also begins to wither away. I demonstrate how Gaga adheres to Bowie's queer template in the beginning of her career and slowly begins to queer the expectations of queer performance. The final chapter delves into the intricacies of the objectification of queerness. Using pop songs such as Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down" as well as Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl," I explore the problem with viewing queerness through heteronormative lens. Finally, I interrogate the challenges and space that the emerging category of "Queer Pop" presents for popular music. Queer pop allows for a space whereby the performance of being queer can be depicted, as opposed to the performative style that audiences of mainstream pop music have become accustomed to. In summary, through an analysis rooted in the difference between *being* and *performing*, this thesis demonstrates that popular music adheres to a heteronormative perspective that ultimately objectifies queerness and promotes an extreme version of queer performance.

Literature Review

Queer

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the origins of the word queer are uncertain. The earliest mention of the term queer can only be traced back to the 16th century German word “quer” which meant “oblique or perverse.”³ In the late 19th century, queer was a hostile and derogatory word used to describe homosexuals. However, by the late 1980’s the community started to use the word queer knowingly in order to reclaim it from its negative connotations.⁴

Nowadays, queer is scarcely used as a derogatory term, although it is increasingly difficult to clearly define the word ‘queer’. Simply put, queer is an evolving term. As Jodie Taylor notes, queer gains meaning when juxtaposed from the norm, and thus queer adapts to heteronormativity as the latter shifts as well.⁵ In the 21st century, queerness continues to evolve to as both a descriptor of sexual identities but also as a way to counter heteronormativity. Queer allies now frequently identify as queer, not because they are non-heterosexual but because they have acknowledged their own deviation from the heteronormative.⁶

The incertitude surrounding the meaning of queerness is precisely what leaves it opens to interpretation and thus renders it vulnerable to being molded by popular culture. Because queerness is a response to the heteronormative, it can never truly be used to

³ "Queer: Definition of Queer in English by Lexico Dictionaries," Lexico Dictionaries | Powered by Oxford Dictionaries, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/queer>.

⁴ "Queer: Definition of Queer in English by Lexico Dictionaries."

It is important to note that the reclaiming of the word “queer” occurred as a reaction of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

⁵ Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-making* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2012), 13.

⁶ Dora Mortimer, "Can Straight People Be Queer?" *Vice*, February 09, 2016, , accessed August 01, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/avy9vz/can-straight-people-be-queer-435.

describe a particular culture. Queerness is used to disturb the culture to which it is juxtaposed to. Taylor observes that queerness often falls victim to a binary logic whereby the juxtaposition of queerness with the heteronormative creates oppressive power relations.⁷ Queer reveals that categories of identity are ineffective, provisional and temporary. It is thus important to remember that when I use the term queer, queer culture or queerness, I am not referring to particular group of people. I am rather referring to the opposition of heteronormative culture, in terms of gesture, fashion, music, arts, cultural practices and aesthetics.

A crucial part of a heteronormative narrative is the popular culture that it creates and fosters. In many ways, popular culture drives the narrative and determines what the norm is. It comes to no surprise then, that the ideologies of queerness are driven by the popular culture in which it operates. Popular culture popularized our understanding of queerness by prioritizing particular elements of queerness which best served its purpose.⁸ Judith Butler best describes this phenomenon when stating that the fight for marriage equality “threatens to render illegitimate”⁹ queer relationships which fall outside the heteronormative ideas of marriage.¹⁰ Michael Warner explains this further by stating that marriage would produce “good gays”, those who neither flaunt their queerness nor question heteronormative norms.¹¹

Queerness operates differently when it comes to popular music. Taylor observes that popular music embraces the flamboyance of queer culture, so much so that we can

⁷ Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 26.

⁸ Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 26.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

¹⁰ Anita Brady and Tony Schirato, "Queer," in *Understanding Judith Butler* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 65.

¹¹ Brady and Schirato, "Queer," 65.

only recognize queerness in blatant and exaggerated forms, such as David Bowie's gender bending acts, Cher's drag performances or Lady Gaga's flamboyant fashion and performances.¹² Popular music's attachment to the extremes of queerness is not a play against heteronormativity. In fact, I posit that popular music adheres to heteronormative norms specifically because it encourages grandiose versions of queerness. In doing so, pop music denies queerness its resistive power, a sense of normalcy as well as the ability to exist outside the flaunts of sexuality. In other words, queerness is reduced to a spectacle focused on displays of sexual and extravagant performances. I explore this further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Pop(ular) Music

Oxford Music Online defines popular music as music that is widely appealing, distributed to the masses and catered towards a mass audience.¹³ As such, for the purpose of this thesis, I further define pop music as Anglo-American pop songs that have been classified on the Billboard charts and which enjoyed a significant amount of popularity. Popular music is not simply an auditory experience, but it is also visual, kinetic and cultural. Popular music incorporates itself in various aspect of our culture, from political to economical and social. Moreover, in today's landscape of music, it becomes increasingly hard to find a genre or style of music that does not contain some elements of queerness.¹⁴ Even harder is to find a popular musician who does not identify in some way, shape or form, as queer. From Lady Gaga, Arianna Grande, Rita Ora, to Cardi B,

¹² Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 50.

¹³ Charles Hamm, Robert Walser, Jacqueline Warwick, and Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "Popular music," *Grove Music Online*, accessed 11 June 2019, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002259148>.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 49.

and more recently Lil Nas X, popular musicians seem to be at the forefront of queer culture, carefully planning their “coming out” announcements.¹⁵ While the rise of queer popular musicians is certainly welcome, it raises many questions about the impact of their music on the queer community.

Authenticity

Much like the word ‘queer’, firmly defining authenticity is a complex task. Queer communities struggle with portraying their authentic selves, especially in mainstream culture. Recently, queer activist Alexander Leon received praise from the community for opening a dialogue about the difficulties of growing up as an authentic queer person.¹⁶ His message demonstrated that queer individuals are rarely allowed to fully explore their identities and resort to “sacrifi[cing] authenticity to minimize humiliation and prejudice.”¹⁷ Authenticity in this context is the open expression of one’s identity. My research tackles authenticity both from a musicological and individual perspective. I seek to provide an understanding of authentic queer music and identity. In other words, I question the elements that construct authentic queer music, as well as what it means to *be* authentically queer in popular music.

From a musicological perspective, authenticity is often synonymous with words such as “traditional,” “real,” “serious,” and “being true to oneself.”¹⁸ In a study on

¹⁵ Gerrick D. Kennedy, "Lil Nas X Came Out, but Has Hip-hop? A Macho Culture Faces a Crossroads," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2019-07-30/lil-nas-x-black-queer-men-hip-hop>; Jill Gutowitz, "The State of Queer Women in Pop Music in 2019," *INTO*, January 09, 2019, <https://www.intomore.com/culture/the-state-of-queer-women-in-pop-music-in-2019>.

¹⁶ Daniel Villarreal, "This tweet about LGBTQ mental health has gone viral & inspired thousands of queer people," *LGBTQ Nation*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2020/01/tweet-lgbtq-mental-health-gone-viral-inspired-thousands-queer-people/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Butler, "Taking it Seriously: Intertextuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (January 2003); Travis Gosa, "Hip Hop, authenticity, and the styleshifting in

authenticity in music, researchers Liming Wu, Martin Spieb and Marco Lehmann suggest two theories: cultural and personal authenticity.¹⁹ Cultural authenticity addresses the perception of a song's sincerity, originality and uniqueness by the listener.²⁰ It is important to remember that cultural authenticity is dependent on the musical context. As Sherry Johnson suggests, indigenous, folk or indie music avoid modernity in their production.²¹ In other words, they avoid tools such as synthesizers as this would be regarded as inauthentic. For pop songs however, the use of modern tools such as synthesizers, auto-tune, artificial reverb and instruments are almost a necessity. Thus as Peterson states, authenticity in popular music centers on "being believable...and at the same time original."²² Pop music's cultural authenticity relies on a socially accepted construct between fans and artists.²³

Personal authenticity addresses the presumed relationship between the artists and the music.²⁴ The listener judges the presumed personal authenticity based on whether musician is true to their artistic vision and individuality or not.²⁵ In contrast, personal inauthenticity is applied to music that appears to be written, performed or sung solely to appeal to the masses and make profit. It is important to note that words such as

the 2016 Presidential election," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no.3 (September 2017) :1-15; Joe Bennett, "Collaborative songwriting: The ontology of negotiated creativity in popular music studio practice," *Journal on the Arts of Record Production* 5 (July 2011): 1–13.

¹⁹ Marco Lehmann, Martin Spieb and Liming Wu, "The effect of authenticity in music on the subjective theories and aesthetical evaluation of listeners: A randomized experiment," *Musicae Scientiae* 21, no. 4 (2016): 444.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sherry Johnson, "Authenticity: who needs it?" *British Journal of Music Education* 17 no. 3 (2000): 278.

²² Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 220.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Marco Lehmann, Martin Spieb and Liming Wu, "The effect of authenticity in music on the subjective theories and aesthetical evaluation of listeners: A randomized experiment," 445.

²⁵ Ibid.

“presumed and “perception” are used deliberately here, precisely because judging the authenticity of a song relies on *assumptions* made sonically, visually or lyrically by the listener. Personal authenticity is crucial to understanding authentically queer music. For example, David Machin explains that boy bands are often seen as inauthentic because they are performers, not creators of the music.²⁶ Thus, personal authenticity is often missing in the case of boy bands. This same process occurs when pop music artists who have no prior ties to queerness or queer culture suddenly attempt to appeal to queer audiences. Through the lens of personal authenticity, cases such as Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down” and Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” are easily perceived as examples of inauthentic approaches to queerness because of the artists’ presumed lack of genuine interest in the queer community at large.²⁷

In summary, based on theories of cultural and personal authenticity, I suggest that queer music must meet two main requirements to be authentic. First, the artist themselves must demonstrate a genuine and sincere investment in queer culture (personal authenticity). This investment comes in a variety of ways, but often manifests in the form of “coming out” or a general message of self-acceptance. Secondly, the queer community must validate the authenticity of the pop song and artist (cultural authenticity). In other words, the approval must be given and not self-appointed by the artists themselves.

²⁶ David Machin, *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound, Text* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010), 17.

²⁷ I analyze Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down” and Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” in more depth in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Normative Regulation

Normative regulation is a theory rooted in various disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology and numerous other fields. Peri Bradley and James Page define normative regulation as the process by which society dictates – or regulates – the behaviours, policies and agendas deemed “normal.”²⁸ The effectiveness of normative regulation lies in its ability to quickly identify those who do not conform to “normal” behaviours and to dispose of these individuals by alienating them from our shared way of behaving. The process of normative regulation relies on individuals regulating themselves but also policing the behaviour of their peers, creating added peer pressure for those who do not conform. Normative regulation thus allows us as a society to clearly recognise when someone’s behaviour is outside the norm of our culture and allows us to feel justified in taking actions against non-conforming individuals.

Categories such as male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual were based on biological sex in the theories from the 1960s and 1970s, which were further defined by dress codes and behaviours. Peri and Bradley note that this “system of criteria” limits our understanding of what is culturally acceptable and eventually defines the boundaries of our behaviour.²⁹ Once unacceptable behaviour is identified, society engages in reward and punishment systems where those who conform are rewarded and those who do not are ultimately ostracised. Our shared values dictate how to behave, dress, act and perform in order to “belong.”³⁰ The power of these shared

²⁸ Peri Bradley and James Page, “David Bowie – the trans who fell to earth: cultural regulation, Bowie and gender fluidity,” *Continuum* 31 no. 4 (2017), 585.

²⁹ Peri Bradley and James Page, “David Bowie – the trans who fell to earth,” 585.

³⁰ Peri Bradley and James Page, “David Bowie – the trans who fell to earth,” 585.

values is the easiness with which those who not belong are rejected and placed “outside the discursive and normative limits of our particular way of doing things.”³¹

For normative regulation to be successful, it must incorporate changing cultural trends and behaviours of society. The success of normative regulation lies in its ability to adapt. In many ways, normative regulation is bound to inevitably break down and accommodate changes, otherwise human culture would remain stagnant and repetitive.³² The process by which normative regulation incorporates, negotiates and integrates changes to create a new standard of behaviour is referred to as assimilation. The question remains as to how behaviours that were once deemed unacceptable become assimilated in our current societal expectations.

Queer Performativity

Performance studies are concerned mainly with the theory and documentation of “human activity as expression.”³³ Performances shape identities, bodies, cultures and stories. In the field of popular music, performance scholars often focus on artists’ performances in order to deconstruct how they influence the identities of others. However, my analysis will also look at the performance of the fans and audiences who rehearse and repeat the actions of the musicians. I posit that this emulation of behaviour becomes an important facet of Butler’s theory of gender as a performance. As Butler writes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Bryant Keith Alexander, “Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture,” in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (California: Sage Publications Inc, 2008), 414.

substance...”³⁴ In the same way that gender is a set of repeated stylized act of the body, I posit that behaviours surrounding queerness – especially in popular music – work in a similar fashion. It is therefore not enough for the musician to introduce the queer behaviour and fashion into the mainstream: the audience needs to engage and repeat the particular behaviour until it is assimilated into our standard of normative behaviour. For this reason, audience participation and fan behaviours become a central part of analyzing the boundaries of oddity, and how we come to define the extremes of queerness.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler argues further that performativity is a “citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”³⁵ In other words, Butler denotes that the performances we produce are often influenced by or citing prior performances of ourselves or others. Whether the emulated performance we produce are conscious or not are less important than the fact that the repetition is often seamlessly assimilated into the expectations of society. Butler goes further to say that this assimilation process or “regulation of identificatory practices”³⁶ often demands our performances to adhere to cultural expectations. Through the repetition, learning and performing of the variations of identities, society complies with the expectation of these new sets of performances and identities, effectively deeming those expectations as normative. This precise intersection between normative regulation and queer performativity is where my analysis lies.

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 2.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

Queerbaiting

Several popular musicians have been accused of queerbaiting, a term used to describe the objection to the use of queer elements or characters in movies, media and music in order to appeal to the queer community without explicitly allowing queer characters to fully develop throughout the course of the film, TV show or music.³⁷ The tactic of queerbaiting -especially in popular music- commonly involves women to women relations which are often trivialized to accommodate the male gaze rather than provided any real legitimacy. A few example of queerbaiting with female to female relationships include Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl." Rita Ora's "Girls," and more recently, Arianna Grande's "Break up with your girlfriend, I'm bored."³⁸

Queerbaiting is also used in correlation with dykesploitation. Dykesploitation refers to the lack of butch women, genderqueer or non-binary folks when it comes to female queer relationships in the media.³⁹ Central to the reproach is the lack of butch females or any indication of an actual relationship between the female characters. The criticism sparks when the elements used reduce queer relationships down to only sexuality. In such a hypersexualized state, queerness lends itself quickly to the male gaze and achieves very little in terms of representation for the queer community. Popular music simultaneously embraces and rejects queerness, by promoting queer representations without the political backlash of conservatism while still maintaining a broad appeal to the masses.

³⁷ Stéphanie Verge, "When Pop Culture Pretends to Be Gay," *The Walrus*, July 18, 2019, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://thewalrus.ca/when-pop-culture-pretends-to-be-gay/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Verge, "When Pop Culture Pretends to Be Gay."

Commodification

Commodification refers to the process by which an object, idea or activity is turned into a commodity by capitalist economies.⁴⁰ Pioneering the cultural definition, Karl Marx argues that a commodity is an object or idea that has been produced to be exchanged for its perceived or deemed value (such as money).⁴¹ Commodification is perhaps best defined for the purpose of my research as the cultural and cognitive process whereby elements that are seen as queer are turned into trends and marketable assets. Danae Clark describes this when she points out that the commodification of lesbianism can be easily seen in advertising images of “lesbian chic.”⁴² She posits that fashionable signifiers such as oversized men’s jacket or military boots become commodifiable as “chic” when they leave the political realm and enter the world of fashion and entertainment.⁴³ Clark alludes to a phenomenon that many queer theorists have pointed out: when queer culture is assimilated into mainstream culture, it loses its resistive meaning and its cultural foundation.⁴⁴

The issue of queer commodities is more complex however, as Guy Davidson points out. The construction of a certain type of image is crucial to self-expression, especially in queer youth cultures.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the problem lies with the assumption that queerness is immune to the world of advertising, marketing and branding. Davidson

⁴⁰ Jayson Beaster-Jones, "Commodification," Grove Music Online, accessed 11 Jun. 2019, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002228122>.

⁴¹ Jayson Beaster-Jones, "Commodification"

⁴² Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," *Camera Obscura* 9 no. 1-2 (September 1, 1991): 193.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (1995): 53; Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 49

⁴⁵ Guy Davidson, *Queer Commodities: Contemporary Us Fiction, Consumer Capitalism, and Gay and Lesbian Subcultures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 20.

argues that queer commodities are often “repositioned and recontextualized” in mass media.⁴⁶ This is to say that the relationship between queerness and commodification is not a one-way conversation, but rather an ongoing discussion where queerness also assimilates elements of mainstream culture and vice versa. This dialog between queerness and popular music will prove to be an important perspective throughout this thesis.

Queer Commodification

The incorporation of queer elements into marketing strategies, rebranding and selling is known as “pink capitalism.”⁴⁷ Pink capitalism recognizes that queer communities, allies and subcultures have enough purchasing power to have brands and markets specifically dedicated to them. Queer visibility – the representation of queer identities in mass media – is often a production of commodification, as Rosemary Hennessy states.⁴⁸ We see our queer or heteronormative counterparts only when they have reached a level of mass visibility, and often that visibility is the product of commodification.

Hennessy states that the incorporation of queer elements in marketing strategies is geared towards “creating lucrative markets” for monetary profits rather than liberation and acceptance.⁴⁹ Indeed, using queer visibility as an indication of acceptance is a flawed concept if the aim of the commodity is not acceptance, but rather to sell to a particular targeted demographic. For example, Hennessy explains that most people who identify as

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lorenzo Yeh, “Pink Capitalism: Perspectives and Implications for Cultural Management” (Dissertation, University of Barcelona, 2018), 3.

⁴⁸ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 111.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 112.

queer lead much less glamorous lives than the trendy and fashionable commodity images of queerness suggest.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as Hennessy suggests, queer commodities in popular culture helps to render queer struggles invisible and reduces queerness down to performative, stylistic and aesthetic elements. The world of fashion especially epitomizes queer aesthetics under the guise of “postmodern chic.”⁵¹ Indeed, the visual component of popular music, including music videos, outfits, gestures and dance moves are all drawn from a history of homoerotic imagery lodged neatly in the world of fashion.

Queer visibility can depend upon current trends. We easily see this with the numerous rainbow flags on businesses around Pride month. Interest in queer themes and issues were at an all-time high in the early 2010s and popular music was one of the first sectors of popular culture to make use of the trend. Singles focused on queer politics such as Macklemore’s “Same Love” and Pink’s “Perfect” remained at the top of the Billboard charts, enjoying wide and unprecedented success. Since then, the Billboard charts have not featured another single with such explicit queer themes in terms of political advocacy. Indeed, while popular music has always been attracted to queer aesthetics, it is rarely drawn to queer culture and rights unless the latter is “trendy.”

Jodie Taylor writes frequently about camp appropriation and the disabling effect of mainstream culture on camp elements. Camp is perhaps best defined by John Wolf, who describes it as a practice that rejects dominant and heteronormative structures in order to present a humorous and ironic aesthetic.⁵² Camp remains widely used today as a trendy phase or fashion statement, removed from its political and cultural significance to

⁵⁰ Ibid, 140.

⁵¹ Ibid, 135.

⁵² John Wolf, “Resurrecting Camp: Rethinking the Queer Sensibility,” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6, no. 2 (May 2013): 2.

queer and drag subcultures. Indeed, in a similar way that mainstream culture strips queer of its political and resistive power, camp suffers the same consequences. Recent examples of camp appropriation in popular culture include the notable outfits presented at the 2019 Metropolitan Museum of Art Gala, where camp was the primary theme.⁵³ Pop music icons such as Lady Gaga, Celine Dion and Katy Perry received much criticism for their interpretation of camp and their disregard for its political roots. As J. Taylor points out, such popular events have the opportunity to redefine camp, molding it to fit a particular interpretation. The process of reinterpreting queerness is also evident in popular music, where commodification happens on a larger scale.

The discussion surrounding commodification and popular music changed significantly in the past few decades, mostly due to technological changes which have shifted the way mass audiences consume music in general. Rasmus Fleischer demonstrates that music subscriptions to sites such as Spotify and Apple Music are perhaps the most commonly used music commodity.⁵⁴ Fleischer questions the very nature of commodification in music. If the way we consume music is through a one-time paid subscription, then we have effectively deemed that all music is equally monetarily valued. Thus, if we are not purchasing songs or albums individually, and if music does not have an individual price anymore, is it still a commodity? Fleischer suggests that subscription-based services such as Spotify and Apple Music are better understood as

⁵³ Cady Lang, "See the Best Dressed and Craziest Looks from 2019 Met Gala," *Time*, May 07, 2019, , accessed August 01, 2019, <https://time.com/5581638/best-dressed-met-gala-2019/>.

⁵⁴ Rasmus Fleischer, "If the Song Has No Price, Is It Still a Commodity?: Rethinking the Commodification of Digital Music," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 9, no. 2 (2017): 161.

commodity producers, which acquire rights and licenses for various music in order to distribute them to a wider audience.⁵⁵

Reducing queerness to a performance is often the result of commodification. The use of queerness in pop music can be an effective tool to capture the attention of mainstream audiences. Indeed, often using queerness as a device to garner attention means reducing it to a spectacle and a performance. Fleischer's work indicates that a re-adjustment of the meaning of music as a commodity in our current landscape is perhaps necessary. Instead of monetary value, the broader purpose of music commodities is to capture the audience's attention as well as encourage exposure and repetition of pop music.⁵⁶ Attention involves the initial or repeated listening of the track. Exposure is the measure to which the track reaches a wider audience. Finally, repetition involves various elements such as audience's emulation of the artists or online discourse such as memes and GIFs which allow the song and the artist to stay relevant in popular culture for a prolonged time.

While scholars have studied the impact of commodifying queerness in magazines, films, television and visual arts, very few have studied the phenomenon in popular music.⁵⁷ In musicology, queerness is studied more specifically in genres such as punk

⁵⁵ Fleischer, "If the Song Has No Price, Is It Still a Commodity?" 161.

⁵⁶ Cherie Hu, "The Record Labels of the Future are already here," *Forbes*, October 18, 2016, accessed August 02, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cheriehu/2016/10/15/the-record-labels-of-the-future-are-already-here/#2e1af7d4872a>.

⁵⁷ Melanie Kohnen, *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet* (London: Routledge, 2017); Yarma Velázquez Vargas, "The Commodification of Sexuality: A Critical Analysis of *Queer Eye*," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2008); Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (1995); Jodie Taylor, "Queer temporalities and the significance of 'music scene' participation in the social identities of middle-aged queers," *Sociology* 44, no. 5 (2010); Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-making* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2012)

and rock, where queer elements are perhaps more overt and noticeable.⁵⁸ Discussing queerness in pop music is now more important than it was in previous decades due to the changing political, cultural, economic and social views of the queer community. Popular music reaches a wider audience of individuals who are voluntarily or involuntarily exposed to music, trends, messages, marketing and branding. As such, the popular music industry is an ideal case through which to explore the relationship between a mass audience, queerness, commodification and music.

I will demonstrate here that queerness is often commodified through a heteronormative lens, which simultaneously disturbs and reinforces queer stereotypes. Popular music can craft its own version of queerness which aligns closely with heteronormativity, rendering it more acceptable to the general public. In doing so, popular music objectifies and alienates the lived experiences and struggles of queer lives. I seek to demonstrate what popular music's version of queerness look and sound like, how popular music disseminates queer elements to a broader audience and finally, how queerness is perceived in today's pop music landscape.

⁵⁸ Doris Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*, (London: Routledge, 2016); Tyina Steptoe, "Big Mama Thornton, Little Richard, and the Queer Roots of Rock 'n' Roll," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2018).

Chapter 1

To Be Queer or to Perform Queerness

The understanding of queerness in academia evolved significantly over the past few decades. The interdisciplinary approach that many queer scholars adopted benefitted and pushed the boundaries of queer theory.⁵⁹ Although much work was accomplished, an important gap remains in understanding queerness as more than just a signifier of identity or an oppositional force to heteronormativity. In popular music especially, queerness is a performance more than an identity. As previously stated, the focus of this research is to explore the extremes of queerness and the consequences of such a performance in popular music. In the research presented here, I propose that the understanding of how queerness comes to be recognized only at its extremes relies on society's ability to discern between being and performing queerness.

This chapter explains and demonstrates the difference between queer as an identity (being) and queerness as a behaviour (performing). I begin this chapter by providing a brief overview of why this distinction between being and performing is crucial to my research, but also to queer theory in general. The sections that follow are dedicated to exploring what it means to be queer, both in everyday interactions and in popular music/media. Subsequently, I explore queerness as a performance. Using Richard Schechner's work on performance, I analyze queerness both as a cultural and artistic

⁵⁹ Tyler Bradway and E. L. McCallum, *After Queer Studies : Literature, Theory and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); D'Lane R. Compton, Tey Meadow and Kristen Schilt, *Other, Please Specify : Queer Methods in Sociology* (California: University of California Press, 2018); Rachel Lewis, "What's Queer about Musicology Now?" *Women & Music* 13, (2009): 43-53.

performance. The work of performance scholars Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera is also crucial in differentiating between an offstage and onstage performance of queerness. This chapter serves as the basis upon which the queer performances of both Bowie and Gaga will be analyzed in Chapter 2 and 3 respectively.

Being VS Performing

Queer is an oppositional force to normality. To identify as queer is to acknowledge one's deviation from cultural norms. Queer opposes normativity and a culture which favors rigid identity criteria and categories. Yet queer is an increasingly difficult word to define. Our understanding of queerness relies often on the acknowledgement and realization of what is normal and acceptable. Our very understanding of queerness thus relies on a binary thought process, where the opposite of normal is queer.

This binary method poses a challenge, as it turns queerness is an umbrella term which encapsulates a multitude of identities, behaviours, sexualities and lifestyle practices. While the research presented in this paper does not seek to re-define queerness, it does attempt to provide a better understanding between *being* and *performing* queerness. In both theory and practice, scholars have struggled to fully express the meaning and definition of queer. It is thus important to understand how popular culture understands and interprets queerness. In current popular culture, queer is an umbrella term for a specific sexual orientation for which all other labels appear inadequate.⁶⁰ "Queer," as an identifier of one's identity, represents the absence and rejection of labels.

⁶⁰ Wander, Ryan. "'Queer'," *Western American Literature* 53, no. 1 (2018): 63.

Thus, to *be* queer is to acknowledge one's identity as a deviation from what is normal or otherwise culturally acceptable.⁶¹

The distinction between *being* and *performing* queerness is crucial to my research and to popular music studies in general. Queerness is more than just an identity in music, it is also a performance. Performances in popular music are often forms of entertainment directed at a mass audience. As such, these performances represent the complex process of performing identity. Yet, as established earlier, queerness is not *one* identity. Queer performances are often lumped in a single category where the lines between being and performing become substantially blurred. Thus, in order to understand the intricacies of queerness in popular music, we must be able to discern *being* from *performing*, as the two actions are rarely linked to each other. In other words, not everyone who *behaves* queerly, *is* queer and vice versa. For many pop artists, queerness is not who they are, but what they do.

Being Queer

The challenge of defining what it means to be queer emerges perhaps because we are depending on a single idea, a predominant identity and even a single word to accomplish too much. Surprisingly, as we move towards a more accepting and inclusive society, the meaning of being queer becomes more confusing. Being queer becomes a personal identity that allows it to be molded by the individual. "Can straight people be queer?" was an important question that emerged in the early months of 2016, after an

⁶¹ Ibid, 63-65.

article by Jenna Wortham was published in the New York Times.⁶² The article sprouted a debate over who can and cannot identify as queer. In many ways, the debate over who has the right to identify as queer goes against the inclusivity and acceptance that queer communities strive for. On the other hand, it is a debate that points to the assimilation of queerness into a heterosexual narrative.

In popular culture, being queer is a marker of one's sexual or gender identity. Being queer is better aligned with a mode of "disidentification," than a mode of identification due to the variety of labels that queer could encapsulate.⁶³ Disidentification is the refusal or inability to concretely label oneself, and thus the individual chooses a non-specific identity marker such as hybrid or queer.⁶⁴ Queer signifies a deviation from cultural norms and acknowledges the binary structures of a normal sexual or gender identity. To *be* queer is to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual etcetera, or to identify as neither heterosexual nor any of these labels. Being queer can also signify one's gender identity and acknowledge that gender is a spectrum of possibilities, rather than a binary.

Being queer is an internal process. Neal Carnes states that queer, like all other identities, "is self-selected, not externally applied."⁶⁵ On many levels, the exploration of being queer is a personal, intimate and unseen progression. Many queer individuals engage in explorations of being different, even before they discover the meanings and

⁶² Jenna Wortham, "When Everyone Can Be 'Queer,' Is Anyone?" *The New York Times*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/magazine/when-everyone-can-be-queer-is-anyone.html>

⁶³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications : Queers of Color and the Performance of Politic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications : Queers of Color and the Performance of Politic*.

⁶⁵ Neal Carnes, *Queer Community: Identities, Intimacies and Ideology* (New York: Routledge), 44.

intricacies of being queer.⁶⁶ The process of coming out reveals that being queer is an inner and invisible development. For many people, coming out is an important step to being queer whereby they reveal their queer identities to family and friends. The mere instance of a coming out process as a sign of an “out” queer person points to the deeply personal and internal nature of exploring and being queer. Being queer is not obvious and evident, otherwise the emphasis on the coming out process would be significantly less. Being queer also implies sets of behaviours and external processes such as performance, which I will explore in subsequent sections of this chapter.

To be queer is therefore not a visual or cultural occurrence, it is an internal and personal endeavour that necessitates exploration and acknowledgement of one’s deviation from cultural norms. Being queer also forms part of a shared identity and code of conduct, or a community. Carnes defines the queer community broadly as an unspoken yet understood set of rules marked by certain aesthetic factors when introduced to popular culture.⁶⁷ In other words, being queer implies a self-selected identity that exists outside of performance. However, when queer as an identity is introduced to popular culture, it necessitates a particular performance and behaviour in order to render the identity visible. In the later sections, I explore this performance in relation to being queer as a marker of identity as well as performing queer without necessarily *being* queer.

Being Queer in Popular Music

As Carnes states, queerness is transmitted through unspoken yet understood acts, behaviours and values.⁶⁸ Munoz also writes of queerness as an ephemeral concept, stating

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 128.

⁶⁸ Neal Carnes, *Queer Community*, 43.

that queerness persisted as “innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”⁶⁹ The ephemerality of queerness as pointed out by Munoz and Carnes is not unlike the ephemerality of popular music. Indeed, in this sense, both queerness and popular music need to constantly reinvent the elements that define them. This ephemeral or short-lived spotlight of queerness is seen often in popular music as well, where being queer is reduced to a trend, a publicity stunt, or a marketable charity. That is, being queer will often attract significant attention upon an artist’s coming out. Additionally, queer pop artists use their affiliation with queer communities to empower through gay anthems.⁷⁰

Queer representation in popular music has recently exploded with myriad of artists coming out as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, pansexual and transgender. Pop artists often have to navigate being queer and being a celebrity. That is, their queerness is watched, judged, critiqued and celebrated by a vast audience. For example, the recent coming out of Lil Nas X as a gay man and Sam Smith as non-binary and genderqueer prompted a vast amount of media attention.⁷¹ Being queer in the context of popular music is often perceived almost as a responsibility whereby queer artists are not simply artists, they are queer icons. On such a public stage, audiences and communities will often hold queer

⁶⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 no. 2 (1996): 6.

⁷⁰ Some notable examples include Lady Gaga’s “Born this way,” Pink’s “Perfect,” Robyn’s “Dancing on my Own,” and Sylvester’s “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).”

⁷¹ Gerrick Kennedy, “Lil Nas X came out, but has hip hop? A macho culture faces a crossroads,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2019-07-30/lil-nas-x-black-queer-men-hip-hop>; Tara Law, “My Pronouns Are They/Them.’ Singer Sam Smith Changes Pronouns to Gender-Neutral,” *Time Magazine*, September 14, 2019, <https://time.com/5677668/sam-smith-they-them-pronouns/>.

artists up as bastions of queer identity. Yet the experience of being queer is rarely recounted by these artists through their music. Queer experiences are instead often described through a heteronormative lens. I explore this further in Chapter 2 and 3.

Representation of what it means to be queer in pop music is also a site of appropriation and experimentation. Artists who identify as queer have also received criticism for promoting queer stereotypes. For example, Katy Perry and Rita Ora have received significant disapproval from the queer community and have been accused of queer-baiting.⁷² Both Perry and Ora encourage the idea that being queer is an experiment designed to confirm one's heterosexuality.⁷³ Perry and Ora treat queerness again as a trend and a brief experimental phase. In this sense, "I Kissed a Girl" and "Girls" are songs about what it means to be queer to a heterosexual cisgender person. This heteronormative lens thus promotes stereotypes of what it means to be queer. Popular music complicates the distinction between being and performing queerness by muddling the lines between queerness as an identity and queerness as a mode of performance. To that end, the next sections will focus on understanding queerness as not just an identity, but also as a performance, which is sometimes unrelated to *being* queer.

Performing

Richard Schechner, author of *Performance Studies: An Introduction* pioneered much of the work on performance theory. Schechner asserts that performances can be categorized into two distinct types: cultural and artistic.⁷⁴ Cultural performance includes

⁷² Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Rita Ora apologizes after LGBT criticism of her song Girls," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/15/rita-ora-lgbt-criticism-of-song-girls>

⁷³ Lisa M. Diamond, "'I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl': The Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality," *Feminism & Psychology* 15, no. 1 (February 2005): 109.

⁷⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory: An Introduction: Revised And Expanded Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2005)

everyday mundane behaviour and acts in which a society's values and interest are rendered visible. In displaying these behaviours, cultural performance stipulates that the performance is perpetuated until it becomes fully assimilated. Some common examples include rituals such as parades, ceremonies, and performances in a social or professional setting, as well as individual performance of race, sexuality, gender and class.⁷⁵ Cultural performance is thus a marker of social as well as individual identity. Artistic performance considers performances as an art form that is informed by cultural performance but is separate from everyday activities. Artistic performance includes acts such as theatrical storytelling, solo performances, films and musical performances.⁷⁶

Schechner emphasizes that anything can be a performance, as long as our analysis asks the right questions and adapts to the particular performance. Performance studies scholars Madison and Hamera explain that performing is commonly seen as “drama, as acting, or ‘putting on a show.’”⁷⁷ For cultural performance, everyday life actions are perpetuated to the point that they become “symbolic practices.”⁷⁸ Cultural performance thus dictates and shapes the assumptions of how people are expected to behave and act in daily life. Madison and Hamera note that this type of performance happens at an unconscious level and is often redefined and reshaped unreflexively.⁷⁹

Schechner also discusses artistic performance as a “refraction, reflection and imitation” of ordinary life.⁸⁰ He goes further to say that artistic performances often

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Madison and Hamera, “Performance Studies at the Intersections,” xii.

⁷⁸ Schechner, *Performance Theory: An Introduction*, 28.

⁷⁹ Madison and Hamera, “Performance Studies at the Intersections,” xii.

⁸⁰ Richard Schechner, “Performance Studies: An Introduction - What is Performance?” Filmed December 2012. YouTube video, 2.15. Posted December 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfAM9dftV1A>

“create their own reality” and in doing so, interact with social and cultural performances.⁸¹ Artistic performances are thus informed by cultural performance as well as their own constructed reality. In other words, artistic performances draw from everyday life as well as previous artistic performances. Hamera and Madison provide a concise definition by stating that for someone to perform is to “reinvent their ways of being in the world.”⁸² To perform is thus to reshape, redefine and perpetuate one’s identity in a broader cultural context. Performance becomes the active, intentional, repetitive and conscious representation of an act, behaviour or idea. We perform daily acts but are also witness to and participate in artistic performances. Additionally, these artistic performances often inform our own daily behaviour. To put it simply, cultural performance can be seen as the offstage behaviour whereas artistic performance is the onstage expression – and often exaggeration – of identity.⁸³

Performing Queerness

Queerness complicates performance. As previously stated, when queer as an identity is introduced to popular culture, it necessitates a particular performance and behaviour in order to render the identity visible. Thus, one way of understanding queer performance is to view performing queerness as rendering *being* queer visible.

Performing queerness provides visible and easily understandable markers of one’s individuality as an opposite force to the dominant culture. From a cultural performance standpoint, queer performance concerns the everyday life of queer people and provides

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Madison and Hamera, “Performance Studies at the Intersections,” xii.

⁸³ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

an understanding of the challenges that they face, which are different than those of their heteronormative counterparts. For example, Russia's plan to ban public displays of affection between queer couples is a threat to queer cultural performance, in that making queerness visible is a crime. Indeed, being queer has never been the challenge. Rather, it is performing queerness which creates a threat to heteronormativity, because through performance, queerness is rendered tangible, reproduceable and visible.

In an analysis of queer performance in Latino communities, Ramon Rivera states that queer performance collapses the idea of being queer with the "practice of 'being there' ...at the site of public queer enactment."⁸⁴ In other words, to perform queerness is to occupy cultural and social space. Rivera examines the ritualistic performances of queer parades. He emphasizes the importance of queer cultural performance, stating that queer performances "'become' a collective by the sheer act of 'being' and performing 'here' together."⁸⁵ In Rivera's analysis, it is quite evident that queerness is a matter of identity and pride parades create a momentary space where queerness can be performed untamed.

Our understanding of queerness has long been informed by its artistic performance in events such as drag kings/queens shows, pride parades, queer music/aesthetic performances, music festivals, queer films and theater. The arts – such as films, theater, visual art or music – are a way to disseminate identity to a broader audience. The artistic performance of queerness allows for the display of queerness outside of shared spaces such as queer parades. Much like the umbrella term 'queer' itself, the artistic performance of queerness is not fixed and can rarely be spoken about in

⁸⁴ Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 1.

⁸⁵ Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 4.

absolute terms. Royster argues that the performance of queerness is “grounded in embodiment.”⁸⁶ In art especially, performing queerness renders it more visible, tangible and replicable. The artistic performance of queerness both mirrors and influences our knowledge of queer lives.

But the stories of queer lives are rarely told by queer subjects, especially in popular music. Queer icons such as Lady Gaga, David Bowie, Madonna and Cher have all garnered success with a large queer audience, despite not having lived publicly as queer individuals.⁸⁷ I explore David Bowie further in Chapter 2 of this thesis as well as Lady Gaga in the subsequent chapter. The capricious and unfixed aspect of queerness allows its elements to be molded by popular culture. Thus, queerness is often performed by those who do not identify as queer themselves. Such individuals perform queerness, but queerness is not a central part of their identity.

Performing Queerness Without Being Queer

Queer continues to evolve both as a descriptor of sexual identities and as a rebellion against heteronormativity. Allies now frequently identify as queer, not because they are non-heterosexual but because they have acknowledged their own deviation from the heteronormative.⁸⁸ Like other types of performances, queer performance can be adapted and performed by others who do not necessarily identify as queer. Fashion trends

⁸⁶ Francesca T. Royster, "Introductory Notes: Performing Queer Lives," *Biography* 34, no. 3 (2011): 7.

⁸⁷ Craig Jennex has argued that for many of the female queer icons, their idolization related more to their ability to rally queer communities together through a display of allyship and creating a sense of belonging. Fans also stated that identifying as a fan of Lady Gaga for example, was a sign of support for the queer community and thus made it easier to identify people who would not be hostile to queer individuals. Craig Jennex, "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia," *Popular Music and Society* 36 no. 3 (2013), 356.

⁸⁸ Dora Mortimer, "Can Straight People Be Queer?" *Vice*, February 09, 2016, , accessed August 01, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/avy9vz/can-straight-people-be-queer-435.

perhaps create the most visible queer performance even with heteronormative crowds. For example, oversized men's jacket and oxford shoes – seen often as a marker of lesbian women – has integrated into mainstream fashion aesthetics quite easily.⁸⁹ Today, these fashion items sell very well amongst women of all sexual orientations, but their queer connotation has yet to disappear. Queer performances behave similarly to fashion trends. In adopting, purchasing, participating and engaging with queer behaviour, fashion, beliefs or aesthetic, a heteronormative individual inadvertently performs queerness without being queer themselves. The process of assimilation strips queerness of its oppositional, political and often threatening power, allowing a more heteronormative crowd to gain access to queer elements.⁹⁰

Heteronormative queerness – that is, queerness performed through a heteronormative lens – strips queer performance of its oppositional strength and objectifies queerness as a spectacle. I suggest that heteronormative queerness is a behaviour akin to artistic performance, rather than cultural or everyday performance. In other words, heteronormative queerness is a conscious use and embodiment of queer aesthetics and elements in popular media. The effectiveness of heteronormative queerness rests in its ability to shock, but not outrage its audience. That is, it presents a type of queerness that is palatable and accessible to a mass audience and dismisses other types of queer performances. In popular music, heteronormative queerness can be seen in depictions of queerness as a passing phase, or as centered solely around sexual behaviours. Everyday aspects of queer lives – cultural queerness – are rarely depicted in

⁸⁹ Guy Davidson, *Queer Commodities*, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

popular media, precisely because such acts are too mundane or ordinary. Using this view of heteronormative queerness, I suggest that our understanding of queerness has been guided by the extreme depictions of queer behaviour and aesthetic by popular media, especially popular music.

Performing Queerness in Popular Music

Performing queerness in popular music has often shocked, titillated and excited audiences.⁹¹ David Bowie was amongst the first of many artists to bring the shock factor of queer performance to a mainstream stage. His performance on *Top of the Pops* revolutionized queer performance and introduced a much-needed deviation from heteronormativity to the mainstream.⁹² I explore his contributions and exploits in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Our need for queerness to shock and excite continues nowadays with performers such as Lady Gaga. Indeed, Lady Gaga continues the legacy of Bowie by catering to the “otherness” of her fanbase.⁹³ She portrays a weird and odd persona, driven by artistic freedom and inclusivity for all in her music. Lady Gaga is explored in depth in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Artistic performance renders queerness even more visible in popular culture. Popular music embraces the extremes of queerness, so much so that we can only recognize queerness in blatant and exaggerated forms such as David Bowie’s gender bending acts, Cher’s drag performances or Lady Gaga’s flamboyant fashion and performances.⁹⁴ Popular music’s attachment to the extremes of queerness is not a play

⁹¹ Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 50.

⁹² Patrick Glen, “‘Oh You Pretty Thing!’: How David Bowie ‘Unlocked Everybody’s Inner Queen’ in spite of the music press,” *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 3 (2017): 410.

⁹³ Melissa A. Click, Hyunji Lee & Holly Willson Holladay, “Making Monsters: Lady Gaga, Fan Identification, and Social Media,” *Popular Music and Society* 36, no. 3 (2013): 365.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 50.

against heteronormativity. In fact, popular music adheres to heteronormative norms specifically because it encourages grandiose versions of queerness. In doing so, pop music denies queerness its resistive power, a sense of normalcy as well as the ability to exist outside the flaunts of sexuality. The performance of queerness in popular music objectifies what it means to *be* queer.

Queer visibility – the representation of queer identities in mass media – is often a product of commodification, as Rosemary Hennessey states.⁹⁵ We see our queer or heteronormative counterparts only when they have reached a level of mass visibility, and often that visibility is caused by the commodification of queerness. In an analysis of mainstream pop music, Rachel Devitt states that the pop music industry often catered to queerness simply because of the “powerful ‘pink’ dollar.”⁹⁶ Additionally, with the rise of social media and online communities, queer fans have become increasingly attuned to queer baiting. While pop music had escaped criticism in portraying queerness as a phase, a fashion sense or an object in the past, such songs are unlikely to make it very far nowadays without a wave of criticism.

The idea of catering to the pink dollar as well as queerbaiting diluted pop music’s interpretation of queerness. The question of authenticity is often raised when pop music benefits from using queer elements. Some examples include Taylor Swift “You Need to Calm Down,” Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl,” Harry Style’s *Fine Line* and Rita Ora’s “Girls.”⁹⁷ It seems that the future of queerness in pop music is the expectation that the

⁹⁵ Rosemary Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 111.

⁹⁶ Rachel Devitt, "'Keep the best of you, 'do' the rest of you': passing, ambivalence and keeping queer time in gender performative negotiations of popular music," *Popular Music* 32, No. 3 (2013): 429.

⁹⁷ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, “For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?” *New York Times*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/arts/music/taylor-swift-you-need-to->

artist who performs queerness *is* also queer. Queerness is not simply what they do, but it is also part of their identity, their perspective and their artistic value. Queer fans are aware of issues of authenticity in queer pop music. This authenticity is often rooted in the idea that to *perform* queer, the artists must *be* queer. Yet, if our understanding and ability to recognize queerness was guided only through extreme performances, then what are the consequences for queer performances by queer artists who do not abide by the grandiose, extravagant and over the top performances that we have come to expect from mainstream queerness? This question is explored further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Conclusion

Being and performing queerness are related, yet separate processes. To be queer is an internal and personal progression that necessitates exploration and acknowledgement of one's deviation from cultural norms. Being queer also constitutes a community of unspoken rules and ritual, which form part of a shared identity and code of conduct. In other words, being queer implies a self-selected identity that exists outside of performance. For popular culture – outside of academia – to *be* queer is to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual etcetera, or to identify as none of these labels at all. Being queer can also signifies one's gender identity and acknowledges that gender as a spectrum of possibilities, rather than a binary.

calm-down-video.html; Jude Rogers, "On Music: Katy Perry — Voice of No Angel," *Rock's Backpages*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/on-music-katy-perry--voice-of-no-angel>; Graham Gremore, "Queerbait? Fans are getting sick of Harry Styles' "maybe I am, maybe I'm not" answers about being bisexual," *Queerty*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.queerty.com/fans-getting-sick-harry-styles-maybe-maybe-im-not-answers-bisexual-20191217>; Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Rita Ora apologizes after LGBT criticism of her song Girls," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/15/rita-ora-lgbt-criticism-of-song-girls>.

Performing queerness can be categorized into two processes: cultural and artistic. Mundane and everyday behaviours of queerness, shared understanding of actions as well as unspoken codes of conduct all constitute the cultural performance of queerness. Performing queerness artistically is yet more complicated. The artistic performance of queerness mirrors as well as influences our knowledge of queer lives. When heteronormative queerness – queerness performed from a heteronormative perspective – utilizes queer elements in an artistic performance, it often objectifies queerness as a spectacle. Popular music especially encourages queerness to be displayed in grandiose performances. Pop music thus strips queerness of its resistant power. In viewing queerness as only an extreme performance, pop music also alienates cultural queerness. In other words, popular music others queer individuals and denies a sense of normalcy to queer lives. The focus of this chapter was to demonstrate that not everyone who *is* queer, *behaves* queerly. Conversely, for pop artists, often queerness is not who they are (being), but what they do (performing). In the subsequent chapter, I focus on Bowie's performances and how his interpretation of a queer performance shaped our understanding of queerness in popular music.

Chapter 2

David Bowie, A Template for Queer Performance

In this chapter, I use theories of normative to demonstrate how queerness is regulated and integrated in society. My aim is to demonstrate how society comes to define the boundaries and parameters of queerness within which artists and musicians should perform. In other words, I seek to explore how cultural common-sense regarding queerness comes about. The boundaries society imposes becomes a standard against which we can make judgements on what is deemed insufficiently queer or too queer to be accepted. I posit here that David Bowie was the popular music standard against which queerness was measured, assessed and evaluated. Bowie presents an ideal case study due to his popularity during the 1970s, but also until his tragic death.

I suggest that as an iconic model of queerness and queer performance, Bowie was emulated on such a colossal scale that his performances became the normative standard of queer performance. Bowie's performances came to form our expectation of what a queer performance should look like. For Bowie and those influenced by him, queer was not who they were, but what they did. This muddled area of identity introduced a distinction between *being* and *performing* queerness and is crucial to understanding how our expectation of queer performance operates. I analyze theories of normative regulation and queer performativity to demonstrate that Bowie's performance has been repeated, influenced and performed to an extent where our cultural expectations of queerness has been molded by Bowie's portrayal of queerness. Bowie radicalized queerness in popular

music and has since been serving as a constant point of reference or “citational practice” as we continue to mirror his performance.⁹⁸

My analysis examines how Bowie presented his personae to challenge and expand society’s understanding of queerness. Bowie’s most well-known persona was perhaps Ziggy Stardust. Ziggy’s character presented an interesting aspect of gender bending as a performance art in the 1970s.⁹⁹ In fact, Ziggy Stardust was the catalyst that propelled queerness into the spotlight and opens a fruitful discussion in terms of sex, gender and representation.¹⁰⁰ Further, I analyze Ziggy Stardust’s iconic *Top of the Pops* performance of July 1972 in terms of queer aesthetic, stage presence and behaviour. I pay careful attention to queerness as a performance, rather than as an identity, and I delve into the intricacies of the space that Bowie created for his audience to *perform* queerness without necessarily *being* queer.

To understand how Bowie disrupts and challenges our notions of normative regulation, we must begin to consider Bowie’s personae as cultural artefacts.¹⁰¹ Bowie’s personae not only gave information about the particular culture we live in, they also educated audiences on queerness and as such fulfilled the requirements of a cultural artefact as defined by Du Gay and Hall.¹⁰² With this understanding, it becomes possible to examine the mechanisms by which Bowie’s persona adhered to, challenged, disrupted

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 2.

⁹⁹ Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 106.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Paul Du Gay, *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc, 1998), 8.

¹⁰² Paul Du Gay, *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc, 1998), 8; Peter Dunbar-Hall, “Semiotics as a Method for the Study of Popular Music,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 22 no. 2 (1997): 127–132.

and questioned a normative agenda. Bowie's queer performance was a strategic compromise between conformity and emulation on behalf of his fans (rebellious youth).¹⁰³ Bowie's changing personae can thus be seen as his attempt to re-invent himself once his actions and behaviour were already assimilated by his fans. I posit that assimilation occurs in conjunction with queer performativity, whereby actions are repeated until they no longer hold the vilified ideas imposed upon them.

David Bowie: A Queer Icon

For David Bowie, the mainstream sense of gender, fashion and sexuality of the 1970s was limiting. Bowie's personae allowed him to challenge, disturb and at times, push the boundaries of masculinity and sexuality. Like many rock stars and musicians of his time, David Bowie was subject to the powers of normative regulation where he had to carefully negotiate between catering to his fans (rebellious youth) and managing the critiques of the music industry regarding his queer performances.

Ziggy Stardust was the persona introduced in Bowie's 1972 album titled "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars."¹⁰⁴ Quickly gaining popularity after its release, the album peaked at number 5 on the UK Album Chart and has sold over 7 million copies worldwide as of 2016.¹⁰⁵ Bowie was giving his audience his version of liberation and in his own words, he aimed to "... reinvent society the way [he] wanted it. With great big shoes."¹⁰⁶ As the story goes, Ziggy Stardust was an alien

¹⁰³ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 132.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 107.

¹⁰⁵ Craig Martin, "Classic Albums Live: David Bowie," *Roy Thomson Hall*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.roythomsonhall.com/tickets/cal-david-bowie/>.

¹⁰⁶ Mikal Gilmore, "David Bowie: How Ziggy Stardust Fell to Earth," *RollingStone*, February 12, 2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/david-bowie-how-ziggy-stardust-fell-to-earth-183340/>

who was sent to save Earth, and in doing so, he won the affection of teenagers as well as terrified their parents.¹⁰⁷ From the beginning, Ziggy already presents as an alienated individual from society. Ziggy was androgynous, omnisexual, extravagant and at times, quirky. Ziggy's fashion was surprising with skintight glittery sequins leotard and painted white skin with a lightning bolt covering much of Ziggy's face. Philip Auslander points out that Ziggy was the amalgamation of all the skills that Bowie had accumulated over the years such as his theatre studies, his musicianship and interest in transvestism.¹⁰⁸ Auslander further explains that Ziggy's persona was more present than Bowie's, even during off stage performances such as interviews. Bowie was rarely performing "as himself" on stage.¹⁰⁹ It is therefore important to remember that my use of Ziggy and Bowie in the coming sections is deliberate. When I refer to Ziggy, I speak specifically of Bowie's persona, and not of Bowie himself.

Ziggy Stardust was more importantly a human brand. A human brand is defined as "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications effort and has been applied in marketing to: celebrities, artist, and icons."¹¹⁰ Bowie was not received as such initially, and it is only when society's expectations of queerness began to shift that Bowie became a human brand. What made Ziggy a successful human brand was his uniqueness and ability to challenge the ideals of a culture in search for liberation. Glam rock provided the perfect entry point for a character like Ziggy Stardust to be successful, especially with glam rock's catchy poppy tunes as well as its effeminate

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 120.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Lindridge and Toni Eagar, "'And Ziggy played guitar': Bowie, the market, and the emancipation and resurrection of Ziggy Stardust," *Journal of Marketing Management* 31, no. 5-6 (2015): 546.

representation of maleness.¹¹¹ Philip Auslander begins his remarkable chapter on Bowie by the latter's own words: "what I'm doing is theatre and only theatre."¹¹² Although perhaps a short or insignificant sentence on Bowie's part, this quote reveals an interesting way into deciphering Ziggy's performances. Indeed, Ziggy was set apart by his blatant and unapologetic admission of his homosexuality: "I am gay, and always have been, even when I was David Jones."¹¹³ The admission of his homosexuality on such a large and public scale had a significant impact on the music scene.¹¹⁴ Suddenly, a glam rock musician was not only portraying elements of queerness from an aesthetic standpoint but was also admitting to being part of queer culture as a gay man. Yet, revealing that this is all "only theatre" offers us the opportunity to view the revelation of Bowie's homosexuality as merely a performance itself.¹¹⁵ Auslander describes Bowie's interview style as distancing himself from being a musician, in "favor of describing himself as a theater artist."¹¹⁶ The interviewer Michael Watts stated that there was always a sense of ambiguity in Bowie's disclosure of being gay.¹¹⁷ The fact that Ziggy was such a prominent persona raised questions about whether it was Bowie or Ziggy who was gay. Indeed, eleven years after this interview with Watts, Bowie called his coming out statement as "the biggest mistake I ever made."¹¹⁸ Bowie explains further that he was young and still experimenting. This further confirmed that it was not Bowie who was

¹¹¹ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 107-108.

¹¹² Ibid, 106.

¹¹³ Ibid, 135.

¹¹⁴ This now famous interview was originally published in the magazine *Melody Maker* in January 1972 in an interview with Michael Watts.

¹¹⁵ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 106.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 111.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 136.

¹¹⁸ Kurt Loder, "David Bowie: Straight Time," *Rollin Stone*, May 12 1983, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/david-bowie-straight-time-69334/>.

coming out, but Ziggy. Ziggy treated being queer and performing queerness as an act. Indeed, Ziggy's admission of *being* queer was another way for him to *perform* queerness.

In an article published in 1978, Bowie says "I was terribly excited by what I was doing then...I felt I was on the *brink* of something exciting, and that's remained all the way through until now."¹¹⁹ The image of Ziggy Stardust had both an air of artificiality and unapologetic realness, which Bowie embodied in every performance, interview, advertisement and public appearance. Ziggy was a new level of queerness which the general public had previously not seen. Audiences could no longer determine where the artist's character (Ziggy) ended and where the real person (David Bowie) began. In challenging normative behaviour, the blurred lines between Ziggy and Bowie became crucial. Audiences began to realize that Ziggy was more than just an on-stage character who made the public uncomfortable. Auslander specifies that it is this "actorly stance" of Ziggy that made it hard for the rock audience to fully accept Bowie.¹²⁰ However, I posit that it is this precise uncomfortable and uneasy feeling that was – and perhaps still is – an extreme version of queerness.

Ziggy flaunted queerness, boldly and unapologetically. Ziggy was one of the artists who gave men in the 1970s "greater freedom" with their masculinity, allowing them to experiment and break away from the rigid cultural regulations of gender.¹²¹ In his book about masculinity in the 1970s, Rutherford explains further that traditional

¹¹⁹ John Rockwell, "David Bowie Keeps on Flirting with Extremes," *New York Times*, May 7, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/05/07/archives/david-bowie-keeps-on-flirting-with-extremes.html>

¹²⁰ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 106.

¹²¹ Peri Bradley & James Page, "David Bowie – the trans who fell to earth: Cultural regulation, Bowie and Gender fluidity," *Continuum*, 31, no. 4 (2017): 591.

masculinity became “unpopular in mainstream culture.”¹²² Bowie’s attempt to blur gender lines provided men the confidence to include and display a more feminine side of their identity. Auslander points out that Bowie’s fans emulated Ziggy quite literally.¹²³ “Bowie boys” and “Bowie girls” formed an entire community centered on the expression of the aesthetic of Ziggy.¹²⁴ These fans often dressed similarly to Ziggy, in “homemade costumes, makeup and hairstyles.”¹²⁵ Although there is much debate about whether Ziggy’s queer approach was purely a marketing tool to garner media attention rather than real progress in sexual politics, a shift in mainstream masculinity was nonetheless possible.

Madonna, Prince and Boy George all challenged existing gender and social norms, but none achieved the level of influence that Bowie did with Ziggy Stardust. Perhaps the one factor that was on Bowie’s side was the element of surprise and the ability to shock his audience. The shortcoming of this shock factor is that it only worked once, even for Bowie, who never embodied another persona as extreme as Ziggy again. Public criticism had become part of the popularization and marketing of Bowie’s successors. Thus, Bowie had already reached the epitome of extremes with Ziggy in terms of queerness. Bowie’s performances in the 1970s challenged the press to write about queer lives and culture. Previous artists of genres such as glam rock used queerness as a way to divert from the norm, but Bowie introduced questions about sexual identity and performance. It is important to note that it was not simply the admission of Bowie’s

¹²² Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford, *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (Trowbridge: Redwood Books, 1988), 226.

¹²³ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 132.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

sexuality that was queer. It was also the fact that Bowie was a married man and a father. His overt sexual performance and aesthetic challenged heteronormative notions about family life. Bowie was a seemingly straight man, with a wife and a child, who came out as gay, performed in a very overtly queer manner and gave advice on make-up and fashion. Bowie's private and public life were both a conundrum to the press and to the audience, and this gave Bowie's queerness more impact.

Bowie was undeniably fearless in the self-expression of his gender fluidity and sexual orientation. It became clear throughout his career that his sexual orientation had little impact on his queer performances. Whether Bowie was gay, bisexual or a closeted heterosexual, he still challenged the norms of normative regulation and in doing so, gave his audience and fans the confidence to mimic his behaviour. The repeated acts of the audience and of Bowie himself shifted the norms concerning queer behaviour in popular music. Bowie had a greater impact upon our understanding and acceptance of queerness in popular music than any artists before him.

Queer Performance on *Top of the Pops*

July 6, 1972 marks an important date in the history of popular music and queer culture.¹²⁶ When Ziggy Stardust took the stage on this important night to perform "Starman" on *Top of the Pops*, no one expected the outrage, discussion and queer visibility that would follow. My aim in this section is to deconstruct this pivotal Ziggy performance, in order to reveal how Ziggy portrayed queerness in a way that encouraged

¹²⁶ "In 1972 David Bowie changes Pop and Rock music forever with his "Starman" performance at Top Of The Pops," Popexpresso.com, July 6, 2019, <https://www.popexpresso.com/2019/07/06/in-1972-david-bowie-changes-pop-and-rock-music-forever-with-his-starman-performance-at-top-of-the-pops/>.

his audience to mirror his actions. Indeed the issue of emulation is complex and requires the understanding that mirroring Ziggy was not simply an aesthetic or visual choice. It also helped viewers to realize their own deviation – their own queerness – from mainstream society. To emulate in this sense is to inspire an audience and to question society's view of queerness. This proves to be important in the case of queer performativity and normative regulation. I analyze three aspects of Ziggy's *Top of the Pops* performance: its aesthetics, his stage presence, and his on-stage behaviour. As previously stated, the audience's participation in repeating, mirroring and engaging in queer behaviour is crucial to shifting how queerness is perceived. That the audience is engaged, personally connected and aware of the performer's intention is crucial here in promoting mindful repetitiveness within a culture. In other words, the audience watching Ziggy on *Top of the Pops* needed to feel personally affected by this performance, thereby promoting a safe environment where queer behaviours (as expressed by Ziggy) can be made visible, repeated and integrated in society.

Ziggy Stardust's aesthetic was certainly rooted in the glam rock style. The aesthetic of glam rock itself was particularly interesting, especially in terms of expression of masculinity and heterosexuality. Glam rock allowed musicians and men in general to dress in a more feminine fashion, but only if this was juxtaposed with an element of heterosexuality.¹²⁷ It was therefore important that the perceived heterosexuality be explicit in glam rock performances. Glam rock artists such as T. Rex, KISS and Alice Cooper for example juxtaposed their glittery clothes and colorful wigs with an expression

¹²⁷ Georgina Gregory, "Masculinity, Sexuality and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock," *Culture and Communication* 5, no. 2 (2002): 42.

of sexual desire towards women.¹²⁸ In T. Rex's music video for *Get it On*, the band is at the forefront for much of the video, but in the background is a female model dressed provocatively riding a motorcycle. The imagery provided creates the impression of heterosexuality, turning ambiguous non-gendered lyrics into sexual desire for the women. Artists thus found subtle and clever ways to counter the homosexuality commonly associated with their glam rock style. In many ways, men could explore their fashion sense if such fashion did not infer the suspicion of homosexuality. In many ways, glam rock parodies queerness. It dismisses it as a phase, a fashion sense, a gesture, rather than a cultural statement of liberation and self-expression.

David Bowie certainly played a crucial role to the development of the glam rock style. Ziggy's outfit for the *Top of the Pops* performance was a multicolored form fitting suit, green laced boots, white painted nails, grey eye shadow and a well-known orange mullet. Ziggy was not extravagant in this aesthetic in this case, but rather conservative. Gregory describes this appeal as a "sophisticated flight to androgyny."¹²⁹ Indeed, Ziggy was neither masculine nor feminine. He was perhaps both or neither as he performed *Starman*. With a persona that told the story of an alien, Ziggy Stardust was ideally situated to be an androgynous figure who could also play with the artistic boundaries of queerness. Finally, unlike his glam rock counterparts, who sported electric guitars and performed in such a way that emphasized the instrument's phallic qualities, Ziggy chose a blue acoustic guitar that he occasionally strapped to his back.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 40.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 52.

Bowie's *Top of the Pops* performance introduced queer performance into mainstream culture to a greater extent than the artists who came before him. Ziggy's androgenized aesthetic was a statement that queerness was not simply a performance, a phase or a fashion sense, it was also an identity. Unlike other glam rock musicians who relied on the visual aspect of queerness, Bowie chose to acknowledge the sexuality behind his aesthetic taste. David Bowie was after all not only married to a woman but also a father, which adequately placed him well within the norms of heteronormativity. However, Bowie's sexuality had always been ambiguous. Bowie had come out as a gay man before his *Top of the Pops* performance, and later as bisexual. His ambiguous sexual identity was rather ideal for the press and audiences in general, because they could purposely choose to disregard the identity they disagreed with. Thus, Bowie was ideally suited to make such an impactful statement about queerness in 1972. Ziggy's performance revealed that queer aesthetic was not just an experiment to be dismissed easily.

His fashion sense paired with his flirtatious mannerisms created a distinctive atmosphere for both Ziggy and his audience. While onstage sexual behaviour was not unique especially with rock performances, Ziggy's coming out complicated these mannerisms. The indication of *being* queer was suddenly a threat to the heterosexual mannerism that rock fans were accustomed to. Ziggy's stage presence received both positive and negative feedback from the press. It became obvious quite early in the performance that Ziggy was not only provocative but also intimate in his stage presence. This performance contributed many significant moments to popular music and queer history. One of them is the precise moment that Ziggy sang "I had to phone someone, so I

picked on you,” with his finger pointed directly at the camera, maintaining an eye contact that made many watching at home feel an intimate and personal connection with Ziggy instantly. Gavin Friday describes this very moment as “bidding [him] to jump ship and join him.”¹³⁰ Indeed, many were affected by Ziggy’s intimate gesture towards the camera. It was perhaps the first time that a purportedly openly gay man flirted with the audience on such a public stage.

Ziggy’s fixed eye contact was more than just a gesture; it was a statement. In the decade before this performance, much of the media focused on vilifying queerness in both its culture and sexuality. The *Sunday Mirror*, for example, published an article “How to spot a possible homosexual,” warning readers that “fondness for the theatre, shifty glances and dropped eyes” are common traits of queer men.¹³¹ This article further indicates the depth of normative regulation. Readers were told how to identify “possible homosexuals.”¹³² It is important to note that the ambiguity or certainty of one’s sexuality did not matter as the media was vilifying any slight suspicion of queer behaviour and sexuality. That is, one did not have to be homosexual to be disparaged: it sufficed simply to act, dress and behave as one (*perform* queerness). This is precisely why Ziggy pointing at the camera was such a crucial moment. Ziggy was defying many preconceived notions about queer men in the 1970s. In doing so, he also announced to the world through his stage presence that queerness should be proudly displayed.

¹³⁰ Gavin Friday, “Foreword,” in *David Bowie: Critical Perspective*, ed. by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, Martin Power (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

¹³¹ Gregory, “Masculinity, Sexuality and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock,” 42.

¹³² *Ibid.*

Finally, Bowie's mannerisms contributed significantly to the impact his queer performance had on the audience. During the first chorus of Starman, Bowie positions his guitar behind his back as Mick Ronson approaches the center stage microphone. Bowie proceeds to casually put his arm around Ronson as they both sing the chorus. This singular act outraged many news stations, calling Bowie "blokey," "a rebel," "revolutionary," and even "a bit gay."¹³³ David Bowie became what many described as an overnight success after this *Top of the Pops* performance. What made this act so outrageous to many was the obvious disregard for heteronormativity and heterosexuality in general. As previously stated, glam rock artists often shrouded their queerness in an obvious display of heterosexuality. Bowie could not have been further away from demonstrating any type of perceived heterosexuality.

Ziggy Stardust was also a way through which Bowie demonstrated that queerness was not just an identity but also a performance. In many ways, it addressed the questions surrounding being and doing queerness. Thus, although there was confusion on whether Bowie was gay or as Ziggy, he performed his version of queerness. Ziggy alluded to the fact that queer culture "might not always remain illicit" as the norm dictated during these times.¹³⁴ The *Top of the Pops* performance gave confidence to the many audience members who wanted to explore queerness. Bowie invited them to perform queerness, without necessarily being queer.

¹³³ Vincent Dowd, "David Bowie: Did he change attitudes to sexuality?" *BBC News*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-21897627>

¹³⁴ Rob Tannanbaum, "David Bowie, The Televisionary," *Billboard*, January 18, 2016, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6843873/the-billboard-cover-story-david-bowie-the-televisionary>

Conclusion

David Bowie promoted queer performativity amongst his fans as well as to other aspiring musicians. By being unabashedly queer in his performance, Bowie became an important figure for those fans who acknowledged their own queerness. Audience participation, especially in terms of “Bowie boys” and “Bowie girls,”¹³⁵ proved to be crucial in his *Top of the Pops* performance and the myriads of fans and press responses after this iconic performance certainly demonstrate this. Through his aesthetic, stage presence and mannerism, Ziggy embodied a queer icon who allowed his audience to feel justified and safe in emulating queer behaviour. Bowie’s performances in the 1970s dared the press to write about queer lives and culture on a popular platform. He challenged the understanding of being and performing queerness. The blurred identity lines between Ziggy and Bowie meant that even the press could not pinpoint whether Bowie assumed queerness as part of his identity, or merely as a performance tactic. Bowie’s private and public life were both a conundrum to the press and to the audience, and this made Bowie even more impactful in challenging ideas of being and performing queer. In these ways, David Bowie’s impact on queer and mainstream culture was both significant and highly influential.

¹³⁵ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 132.

Chapter 3

Lady Gaga: Queering Queer Performance

Displays of queer elements in popular music have often shocked and provoked audiences. Bowie was amongst the many artists who used queerness as a way to upset the expectations of society. Given the ephemeral aspects of popular music scene, it is not entirely surprising that artists often feel the need to constantly reinvent and redefine themselves, their music, or their aesthetic in order to stand out. In the case of queerness in pop music, we often expect the theatrical, glittery, extravagant and excited performances of Gaga and Bowie. This expectation often drives queer artists to upstage their previous performances, driving the queerness of these performances to an extreme.

This chapter explores the evolution of queerness in popular music by comparing Lady Gaga's and David Bowie's performances. Much like David Bowie, Lady Gaga redefines the boundaries of queerness and blurs the line between *being* and *performing* queerness. I suggest that Lady Gaga performs an even more extreme version of queerness compared to the foundation that Bowie had set. I define extreme in this context as the rejection of current expectations. In other words, while Bowie performed a type of queerness that was at odds with normativity, Lady Gaga's performances rejects the expectations placed on queerness itself. Gaga's queerness revolves around revealing the ridiculousness of having expectations in a quickly changing field such as popular music. I posit that Gaga's extremes denaturalize our understanding and expectations of queerness, whereby normativity does not simply shift but also begins to weaken.

I begin with an analysis of Gaga's tribute to Bowie at the 2016 Grammys Award ceremony. It was evident that Lady Gaga's queerness lay in the rejection of an "appropriate tribute," by introducing her own elements to Bowie's music and aesthetic, thereby broadening his legacy.¹³⁶ I further my study of Gaga's performance with an analysis of her single "Applause" from the 2013 album *Art Pop*. I analyze the lyrics and music video of this particular single to reveal the intricate atmosphere created when Gaga subverts expectations of a typical queer performance in terms of sexuality, authenticity and ephemerality. I suggest that Gaga's queerness, defined by her extravagant, monstrous and sometimes ridiculous aesthetic, is stripped away in "Applause" specifically because her performance rejects the expectation of what it means to be queer. I pay careful attention to the importance of fan and community involvement in Gaga's performance. Gaga's queerness is validated and enriched by her fans who embrace queerness both as a performance and a state of being. I posit that Lady Gaga's "Applause" redefines the expectations of queer performance, where she rejects queerness in popular music as flamboyant or grandiose and acknowledges queer performance as a spectrum.

Queering Tributes: Lady Gaga performs in honor of David Bowie¹³⁷

Lady Gaga's tribute to David Bowie during the 2016 Grammy Awards presents an interesting opportunity to explore Gaga's extreme version of queerness. I suggest that Lady Gaga's tribute uncovers a new layer of queer performance in Bowie's music and performance. Lady Gaga's tribute reveals Bowie's queerness as more than just a set of

¹³⁶ Kat Nelligan & Liz Giuffre, "Tale of Two Tributes: Bowie Remembered at the Grammys and the Brit Awards," *Contemporary Music Review* 37, no. 3, (2018): 238.

¹³⁷ "Watch Lady Gaga's Grammys Tribute to David Bowie," Racked.com, February 15, 2016, <https://www.racked.com/2016/2/15/11007526/lady-gaga-grammys-2016-david-bowie>.

personas that can be slipped on and off by the performer. Gaga demonstrates that the appeal of Bowie's queer performance rests in its ability to be molded and cited and thus to evolve in the hands of other artists. I pay careful attention to the particularly queer theatrics of the performance, which was called "mentally confus[sing]" and "irrational."¹³⁸ In this way, Lady Gaga's queerness lies in her rejection of a traditional memorial, by introducing her own character and elements during her tribute to Bowie.

Music tributes are often daunting due to the expectations that the performer will authentically and meaningfully honor the deceased artist. Music critics are quick to point out when a tribute did not fulfil the expected criteria. Tribute performances are commonly expected to include either one or several of the artist's songs, performed in way that allows for a proper farewell to the artist and recognition of their music. Yet tributes are problematic when we consider that to tribute authentically and meaningfully often results in a performance that places the tribute artist in a submissive position to the honoree. That is, an appropriate tribute will commonly expect the artists to embody the artist, but not overshadow him/her. In a way, tribute artists are expected to be themselves *and* the honoree – but not too much – especially in their delivery of the performance.

Lady Gaga frequently cites David Bowie as one of her inspirations.¹³⁹ Given her work in queer performance, as well as her blatant love of 'otherness', it is no surprise that Gaga was commissioned to perform a tribute to Bowie at the 2016 Grammys. To many,

¹³⁸ Michelle Geslani, "Duncan Jones Described the Performance as 'Mentally Confused' and 'Irrational'," *Consequences of Sound*, February 17 2016, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2016/02/david-bowies-son-didnt-like-lady-gagas-grammys-tribute/>.

¹³⁹ Lori Burns & Mark Lafrance, "Celebrity, Spectacle and Surveillance: Understanding Lady Gaga's 'Paparazzi' and 'Telephone' Through Music, Image and Movement," in *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion, and Culture*, ed. Martin Iddon, and Melanie L. Marshall (London: Routledge: 2014), 146.

Gaga was “the obvious choice” to honor the memory of Bowie.¹⁴⁰ Lady Gaga delivered an exhilarating 7-minute performance, remixing several of Bowie’s hits in one extended piece. Gaga opened with a close-up of her face on the main screen with various graphics such as the iconic lightning bolt projected on her face. As she sung *Space Oddity* during the opening, Gaga was expressionless and allowed the music as well as the graphics to be the centerpiece of the tribute. The music switched when the live band began playing and Gaga emerged onstage singing “Changes.” Gaga sported an orange wig and white gown similar to Ziggy’s style. Much like the imitation of ‘Bowie boys’ and Bowie girls,’ Gaga attempted to emulate Ziggy to the best of her abilities. The performance continued as Gaga quickly shed the white gown to reveal an ornate suit and feather sash. She moved to a hydraulic powered piano and sang “Ziggy Stardust.” After about twenty seconds of singing “Ziggy Stardust,” Gaga moved on an energetic performance of “Suffragette City” and “Rebel Rebel.” The performance carried on with choreographed dances to “Fashion,” “Fame,” “Under Pressure” and “Let’s Dance.” Finally, the 7 minutes performance ended with Gaga singing “Heroes” while pictures of Bowie appeared on the main screen.

Gaga’s tribute was not well received by critics or even Bowie’s son, Duncan Jones, mainly because it subverted the expectations of a tribute performance. Lady Gaga did not abide by what an “appropriate tribute” should look and sound like.¹⁴¹ In an

¹⁴⁰ Barbara Ellen & Peter Robinson, “Is a Lady Gaga tribute to David Bowie the best way to remember him?” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/06/is-a-lady-gaga-tribute-to-david-bowie-the-best-way-to-remember-him>; Kurt Schlosser, “Lady Gaga’s spot-on, high-tech David Bowie tribute steals the show at Grammys,” *GeekWire*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.geekwire.com/2016/lady-gaga-david-bowie-grammys/>; Julia Felsenthal, “Lady Gaga Channels David Bowie’s Theatricality,” *Vogue*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/lady-gaga-david-bowie-grammys-2016-performance>.

¹⁴¹ Nelligan & Giuffre, “Tale of Two Tributes,” 238.

analytical comparison of Lorde¹⁴² and Lady Gaga's tributes, scholars Kat Nelligan and Liz Giuffre suggest that an appropriate tribute according to many critics relies on two main prospects: "that the performer be demure in relation to the artist being honoured, and that they appear to genuinely 'mean it.'"¹⁴³ Although the authors suggest that the negative response of critics is partly due to the inauthentic feel of Gaga's performance, I suggest that this debate about authenticity applies to queer performances in popular music more broadly. In rejecting expectations for an "authentic" performance, Gaga performs an extreme version of queerness which critics cite as extravagant and over-excited.

The criticism of Gaga's tribute reinforced Bowie's performances as templates of queerness in popular music. Many felt that Lady Gaga's performance Bowie's memory, claiming that Gaga could not honor Bowie with such a theatrical performance.¹⁴⁴ Critics elided Gaga's vigorous attention to detail in specifically highlighting what made Bowie's performances queer.¹⁴⁵ Despite the criticism, it is undeniable that Gaga's tribute was "performatively queer."¹⁴⁶ In embodying Bowie's personas during the performance, Gaga pointed out that these can themselves be personified by others. In many ways, she

¹⁴² Lorde's tribute took place at the 2016 Brit Awards. Lorde performed "Life on Mars" with Bowie's backing band from his last tour.

"David Bowie Tribute | The BRIT Awards 2016," BRITs, February 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7I3y7LOzLc>.

Neil McCormick, "Lorde's Tribute to David Bowie, Brit Awards 2016: 'Heartbreaking'," *The Telegraph*, February 24, 2016.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Neil McCormick, "Lorde's Tribute to David Bowie, Brit Awards 2016: 'Heartbreaking'," *The Telegraph*, February 24, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/lordes-tribute-to-davidbowie-brit-awards-2016-heartbreaking/>; Maura Johnston, "Lady Gaga's David Bowie Tribute Didn't Do Either Artist Justice," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/16/lady-gaga-davidbowie-tribut-grammy-awards>; Karl Quinn, "Grammy Awards 2016: Lady Gaga Tribute to David Bowie Makes Heroes of Neither," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/grammys/grammy-awards-2016-lady-gaga-tribute-to-davidbowie-makes-heroes-of-neither-20160216-gmvf52.html>

¹⁴⁵ Nelligan & Giuffre, "Tale of Two Tributes," 250.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

wore Bowie's persona to give him a proper send off, while emphasizing that his queering is not over and should continue in popular music. Through a queer approach to the tribute, Gaga's intense queer performance can be seen in a more positive light, one that Bowie himself would likely have approved of.

Lady Gaga maintained a strong stage presence during the performance. As Gaga performs with a full band, dancers, props and a moving keyboard, images from Bowie's music videos and promotional images from his career appear on the screen behind. Gaga did more than just cover Bowie's songs, she also incorporated his iconic mannerisms into her performance. Audiences saw Bowie's controversial hand over the shoulder of his guitarist reenacted by Gaga as she casually drapes her hand around the main guitarist. During the performance, Gaga also moves in a similar way to Bowie, emphasizing the one hand on the hip movement, to the slight head bangs and squinting facial expressions often apparent in Bowie's performances. Towards the finale of the performance, Bowie is seen on the screen surrounded by stars as if Gaga was sending him to space.

More specifically, Gaga carefully inserted her own style in the tribute. The 7-minute medley was interspersed with brief acoustic interludes in contrast to the intensity of the band. The act of inserting piano interludes and acapella versions of her songs has become a "trademark" of Gaga's performance style and is a frequent occurrence at her concerts.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the particular queer theatrics of the performance are evident in the heavy use of technology and robot-like instruments (ie. her hydraulically powered piano). Gaga's performance was in fact prefaced by an Intel commercial where she states that the

¹⁴⁷ Katrin Horn, "Camping with the Stars: Queer Performativity, Pop Intertextuality, and Camp in the Pop Art of Lady Gaga," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, 11, (2010): 5.

technological aspect takes her performance “to another level.”¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Gaga wanted an extravagant tribute, stating that the goal of the tribute – aside from honoring Bowie – was also for the performance to “go beyond [the] standard constraints.”¹⁴⁹ While many critics thought of the technological theatrics as upstaging Bowie, the main aspect of the performance reinforced Bowie’s legacy in terms of innovation and reinvention, a point that was often missed by the critics.

Gaga’s performance was also not a goodbye to Bowie. Her use of technology, stage setup and medley of songs suggests a futuristic and science fiction-based environment that Bowie –and more specifically, Ziggy– thrived on. This is further reinforced when we consider that Gaga wore an outfit similar to Ziggy throughout the entire performance, as if to maintain focus on this specific persona. Gaga’s tribute indicates that Bowie continues to influence popular music. Reviewing the criticism that Gaga received for the tribute allows us to shed light on how expectations are formed and how Gaga specifically defies them. Lady Gaga’s unwillingness to conform to expectations for a proper tribute for Bowie demonstrates her ability to perform queerness at its most extreme intensity. Lady Gaga not only embodied Bowie’s persona, she also adopted his mannerism and love for the grandiose. Gaga pursued Bowie’s queerness further through the use of technology and graphics to elevate her performance, in the same way that Bowie did in many of his music videos. In delivering a “performatively queer” tribute, Gaga sidestepped the expectations placed on her, and was deemed

¹⁴⁸ Julie Miller, “How Lady Gaga Turned into David Bowie for Her 2016 Grammys Performance,” *Vanity Fair*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/02/lady-gaga-2016-grammys-david-bowie-performance-video>.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

“extravagant”, “over the top,” “artificial,” and “irrational.”¹⁵⁰ Gaga’s tribute to Bowie at the 2016 Grammys demonstrates queer performance at its extremes through the rejection of what is *expected* of her as a performer.

Defying Expectations: Lady Gaga’s “Applause”

“Applause” was released in August 2013.¹⁵¹ The song was a show of gratitude to Gaga’s fanbase. Gaga acknowledges that fan applauses and cheers keep her music and performances relevant for longer, stating that her work will not “live on unless there is an audience to remember it.”¹⁵² Gaga states that the applause she hears after a performance validates her as a performer and lets her know that she has made her audience and fans happy. “Applause” is in many ways a tribute to Gaga’s fanbase, nicknamed the Little Monsters. In this section, I explore Lady Gaga’s rejection of expectations through an analysis of her single “Applause”. I suggest that Gaga’s queerness reveals the expectations that artists must constantly reinvent and redefine queerness as an element that shocks and provokes audiences at every step. “Applause” was criticized by many specifically because of the lack of a typical queer presentation, which rendered her performance unrecognizable as queer to many critics. Gaga uses “Applause” as a way to honour, praise and unify her fanbase. Critics failed to acknowledge Gaga’s fanbase who accepted and considered “Applause” to be a queer performance. Indeed, for Gaga, it is her fans that dictate whether the performance is queer. Gaga’s “Applause” reveals that queerness is more than just theatrics and over the top performances. Through a queer

¹⁵⁰ Nelligan & Giuffre, “Tale of Two Tributes,” 250.

¹⁵¹ “Lady Gaga - Applause (Official Music Video),” Lady Gaga, August 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pc091kroVgQ>.

¹⁵² Lady Gaga (@ladygaga), Twitter post, September 18, 2013, <https://twitter.com/ladygaga/status/380355511779995648?s=20>.

analysis of “Applause”, I posit that Gaga’s single rejects the expectation of what queer is expected to be in popular music. “Applause” rejects expectations of queerness by addressing three aspects of popular music; sexuality, authenticity and ephemerality. Firstly, “Applause” blurs the line between being and performing queer by revealing that queerness is not necessarily centered around sex. Secondly, “Applause” indicates that queer music is heavily dependent on fandoms; a point that critics rarely take into account. Lastly, “Applause” provides a way into discussing questions of queer authenticity. I delve into why and how Gaga manages to create an authentic queer song and experience with “Applause.” “Applause” demonstrates that there is more than one-way to be and perform queerness. Gaga exposes that audiences struggle to see queerness in performances that do not incorporate over the top and exaggerated elements.

Lady Gaga’s “Applause”: Sexuality

Pop music’s audiences are rarely capable of differentiating between simply performing or being queer. Indeed, many times asking for queer music or content “is like asking for pornography.”¹⁵³ Thus, for a pop song to be recognized as queer, it must explicitly address sexuality or be performed at an extreme. This stereotypical approach to queerness creates a hegemonic expectation of what being and performing queerness should sound and look like. Lady Gaga’s “Applause” defies expectations surrounding both sounding and looking queer. In rejecting the expectation of a sexual topic, Gaga demonstrates that queerness is not necessarily centered around *being* queer or one’s sexuality.

¹⁵³ Anne Marie Navar-Gill & Mel Standfill, ““We shouldn’t have to trend to make you listen”: Queer Hashtag Campaigns as Production Intervention,” *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3-4 (September 2018), 98.

“Applause” is one of the few songs on the album *Artpop* in which Gaga does not explicitly sing about sex. From an aesthetics standpoint, the music video for “Applause” is crafted carefully to disrupt any reference to eroticism. In the opening scene of the video, Gaga is seen laying on a mattress on the floor, dressed in a black bikini with laced hand shaped cups and high heeled boots. Even with all the fashionable elements present, the opening scene is an indication of Gaga’s sexuality and its simultaneous rejection. The black and white style of photography puts more emphasis on elements of horror than eroticism in the scene. The neo-noir cinematography here distorts Gaga’s sexuality, obscuring her body even as she lays seductively on the mattress. The black hand shaped bikini also makes it apparent that Gaga is being groped by someone. Gaga’s clothing in the reception of “Applause” is omitted compared to the image nitpicking that critics commonly use when describing female artists in popular music.

Musically speaking, there are no elements in the song’s lyrics or music video that convey anything remotely sexual, either directly or metaphorically. However, to truly offer a queer reading of the vocal performance of “Applause”, we must first understand what it means to be vocally queer. Queer scholar Yvon Bonenfant describes queer vocals as “reaching out” to listeners.¹⁵⁴ He argues that queer voices have often had to be quiet, to avoid the criticism of a heteronormative audience who “really might not want to feel queerness touching them.”¹⁵⁵ Bonenfant’s analysis exposes the reason behind the grandiose performances commonly associated with queerness. Queer vocals are thus formed through a response to forced silence which is juxtaposed commonly in popular

¹⁵⁴ Yvon Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts* 15, no. 3 (October 2010): 76.

¹⁵⁵ Bonenfant, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” 79.

music by vocal intensity, which is often unapologetic in its overt sexuality and eroticism. Gaga disrupts this expectation for queer vocality in her performance of “Applause”, eschewing the expected grandiosity. In fact, Gaga’s vocals are rather unemotional in “Applause”. Gaga sings the pre-chorus somewhat uninterestingly, allowing the steady snare drum and artificial clap sounds to build up to the chorus. She continues to sing in the lower part of her range with little to no inflection each time she sings the word ‘applause.’ She employs a similar approach to the verses as she sings with little melodic movement. The toned-down musical approach to “Applause” disrupts the extravagant and theatrical style of other queer performances. In using a simple and direct vocal method, Gaga effectively denies the “exchange of erotics inherent in queer vocal exchange.”¹⁵⁶

Lady Gaga’s “Applause”: Fandom

One of the most important aspects of Gaga’s impact is her fandom. Through a carefully constructed relationship between herself and her fans, Gaga manages to create a unique following. Central to this fandom is the understanding that being different, or queer is not only valid, but also encouraged.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Gaga’s approach to unifying her fans through fan clubs, branded names, exclusive content, as well as community and personal interaction creates an environment where being a fan is more than just purchasing her CDs and tickets, it becomes part of one’s identity.¹⁵⁸ Much like Bowie, Gaga creates an atmosphere whereby audiences are encouraged to imitate, participate and

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 80.

¹⁵⁷ Melissa A. Click, Hyunji Lee & Holly Willson Holladay, “Making Monsters: Lady Gaga, Fan Identification, and Social Media,” *Popular Music and Society* 36 no. 3 (June 2013), 361.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

discuss their idiosyncracies, without fear of judgement. Gaga manages to unify her fans through a sense of belonging and “group membership,”¹⁵⁹ going as far as creating a social network dedicated to her fans.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, her fans indicate that they frequently use being a fan of Gaga to identify those who are less hostile to queerness.¹⁶¹ In other words, if one identifies as a Gaga fan, there is less chance that they are homophobic or unfriendly. It is precisely because of the participation and emulation of fans that Gaga’s “Applause” subverts the expectation of what it means to perform queerness. Gaga’s fans’ involvement reveals that queer focused music is not simply a passing phase to be praised while it trends on the *Billboard*. Instead, the intense fan involvement in Gaga’s “Applause” and her music in general exposes the need for a different type of queer performance typified by Gaga’s performance of “Applause.”

Lady Gaga is known as “Mother Monster” and her fans are known as “little monsters.” The descriptors effectively summarize the role of each party. Gaga, much like a Mother figure, provides a safe and accepting space for her numerous offspring to express their individuality.¹⁶² This expression is reciprocated by Gaga herself through her numerous interactions with her fans on online platforms. Yet this affinity with the monstrous and the grotesque has a deeper tie to queerness in Gaga’s case. In a study of western monstrosity, David Gilmore suggests that monsters are more than just scary creatures; they represent the “human qualities that have to be repudiated, externalized,

¹⁵⁹ Jennex, “Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia,” 355.

¹⁶⁰ Although open to the public, the social network, littlemonsters.com, has attracted mostly Gaga’s fanbase.

Julie Bort, “Lady Gaga opens her own social network to the public,” *Business Insider*, July 9, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/first-looks-lady-gaga-opens-her-own-social-network-to-the-public-2012-7?op=1&IR=T>.

¹⁶¹ Jennex, “Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia,” 356.

¹⁶² Melissa A. Click, Hyunji Lee & Holly Willson Holladay, “Making Monsters: Lady Gaga, Fan Identification, and Social Media,” 361.

and defeated.”¹⁶³ In this sense, we can draw some parallels between queerness and monstrosity as a metaphor. Both queerness and monstrosity attempt to redefine and push the boundaries of the normal.

Much like the reclamation of the once derogatory word queer during the AIDS epidemic, Gaga and her fans attempt to reclaim the monster metaphor in order to demonstrate that to perform queerness is not necessarily similar to being queer, in the same vein that to *perform* monstrosity is not inevitably to *be* a monster. In all the criticisms of Gaga’s “Applause” or the album *Artpop* itself, mention of the fans’ involvement or enthusiasm is sorely lacking. Gaga’s fans observe that her concerts are often more queer positive than the annual Toronto Pride parade.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, fans feel “liberated” at a Gaga concert, not only in terms of accepting who they are but also how they perform in regard to clothing choice, behavior, mannerisms and so on.¹⁶⁵ Fan participation during the promotion of “Applause” involved more than just concert attendance. Many fans used social media to promote the single through make up tutorials, dance routines, music covers, fan reaction videos as well as dressing up as Gaga. What the critics are not explicitly saying here speaks more loudly than what they are criticizing. They fail to recognize the involvement of Gaga’s fans in “Applause”, and the song’s ability to empower and influence. Through a carefully constructed fan-celebrity relationship, Gaga embraces the qualities that normative culture has frequently rejected and reconfigures the term “monster” in a similar way that “queer” was reclaimed.

¹⁶³ David Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁶⁴ Jennex, “Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia,” 356.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Lady Gaga's "Applause": Authenticity

As previously discussed, theories of personal and cultural authenticity provide a framework within which we can better understand queer authenticity.¹⁶⁶ Personal authenticity is the artist's genuine interest in queer culture and elements. Cultural authenticity comes from the validation that fandoms or queer communities provide after they judge the sincerity and originality of the song and artist. Indeed, Gaga fulfils the criteria for both personal and cultural authenticity. She repeatedly advocates for the LGBTQ+ community as well as promotes a broader message of self-acceptance and confidence. A significant part of her fandom comes from people who identify as queer in some way, and thus she often receives praise from the queer community at large.

"Applause" was criticized widely as being "attention-seeking," and "too art, not enough pop."¹⁶⁷ For many critics, the idea of a pop star enjoying and demanding more "Applause" from her audience was an inauthentic approach to popular music. While Gaga is acknowledged as a queer icon frequently in reference to her previous single "Born this way"¹⁶⁸, these critics struggle to see queerness in "Applause," as it does not incorporate over the top and exaggerated elements. Through these critics, we see that to be authentically queer in popular music is to address issues of *being* queer as evident by songs such as "Born This Way." However, this conclusion is challenging, especially when we consider that some of the most problematic pop songs directly deal with themes

¹⁶⁶ Marco Lehmann, Martin Spieb and Liming Wu, "The effect of authenticity in music on the subjective theories and aesthetical evaluation of listeners: A randomized experiment," 445.

¹⁶⁷ Spencer Kornhaber, "Lady Gaga's Artpop Is an Attention-Freak's Manifesto," *The Atlantic*, November 4th, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/lady-gagas-em-artpop-em-is-an-attention-freaks-manifesto/281103/>; Joe Lynch & Jason Lipshutz, "'ARTPOP' Revisited: Arguing the Pros & Cons of Lady Gaga's Challenging Third Album," *Billboard.com*, October 25, 2016, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/7556753/lady-gaga-artpop-revisited-merits>.

¹⁶⁸ Jon Savage, "Lady Gaga's New Gay Anthem," *Rock's Backpages*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/lady-gagas-new-gay-anthem>.

surrounding queer as an identity (ie. Katy Perry's "I kissed a Girl," Rita Ora's "Girls," or Harry Style's *Fine Line*). Gaga is not *being* queer in "Applause", she is simply *performing* queerness as authentically as she is able to, specifically for her queer fanbase. Moreover, in the case of "Applause," the queer connotations and validation comes from Gaga's fans directly. Queer authenticity in "Applause" is thus apparent through the acknowledgement of queer fans and community, rather than the artists' self-appointed queerness (cultural authenticity).¹⁶⁹

Both queerness and authenticity are constructed discursively.¹⁷⁰ That is, the boundaries and connotations of what it means to be authentic and queer in a culture at a particular time depends upon a variety of factors. Simon Frith states that for music to be authentic, it must express *something*¹⁷¹. Conversely, he says, "Bad music is inauthentic; it expresses nothing."¹⁷² "Expressing nothing: is precisely what critics accused Gaga of. In a review, critic Mike Diver states that the album was "*just sometimes* devoid of relatable sentiments."¹⁷³ He continues on, accusing "Applause" and the album as a whole to have no "notable progression," "central theme" or "real narrative."¹⁷⁴ Similarly, critic Kevin Fallon states that the entire album including the title track "Applause", "could mean

¹⁶⁹ I explore the idea of self-appointed queerness as opposed to being acknowledged by the queer community itself further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁰ Mark Butler, "Taking it Seriously: Intertextuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (January 2003), 1.

¹⁷¹ Simon Frith, "Towards an aesthetic of popular music," in *Music and society: The politics of composition, performance and reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 136.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Mike Diver, "Lady Gaga: *ARTPOP*," *Rock's Backpages*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/lady-gaga-iartpopi>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

nothing at all.”¹⁷⁵ Citing that the artistic approach and creativity of the album was an “obsession,” Fallon asks “what’s the point?” as if to dismiss the album entirely.¹⁷⁶ Gaga’s various assertions that “Applause” was a reference to the “Applause” from her fans at the end of her performances fell on deaf ears to these critics. To Gaga, “Applause” was a celebration of the validation she received, proving that she provided adequate entertainment and joy to people.¹⁷⁷ Despite such comments from the artist herself, critics were still reluctant to acknowledge the authenticity in Gaga’s “Applause”.

In deeming Gaga inauthentic, these critics reveal that the value of authenticity in pop music rests upon the artists being “ordinary.”¹⁷⁸ Ordinary in this context applies to the ability for the artist to relate to a broader audience offstage, often describing an artist as “down-to-earth,” or “friendly.”¹⁷⁹ Yet, Gaga poses a threat to the intersection of popular music, queerness and authenticity. If pop music artists must be ordinary to be authentic, then Gaga’s queerness disrupts the notion of being ordinary. Moreover, if pop music is “perceived as fakery” and “less real”¹⁸⁰, then the extremes to which Gaga performs her queerness within the context of popular music only amplifies the inauthenticity of “Applause”, precisely because to perform queerness is to perform the opposite of ordinary.

¹⁷⁵ Kevin Fallon, “ARTPOP’ Review: Lady Gaga’s Album Wants to Be Everything, But Is Nothing at All,” *Dailybeast*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/artpop-review-lady-gagas-album-wants-to-be-everything-but-is-nothing-at-all>.

¹⁷⁶ Fallon, “ARTPOP’ Review”

¹⁷⁷ Michael Cragg, “Lady Gaga: ‘People think I’m finished,’” *The Guardian*, September 3, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/03/lady-gaga-people-think-im-finished>.

¹⁷⁸ Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, “Stance and the Construction of Authentic Celebrity Persona,” *Language in Society* 47, no. 5 (2018): 715

¹⁷⁹ Valentinsson, “Stance and the Construction of Authentic Celebrity Persona,” 716.

¹⁸⁰ Jacqueline Warwick and Adrian Allison, *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music : Performance, Authority, Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2016): 191.

Conclusion

Lady Gaga offers interesting and complex queer performances. Gaga's performances attempt to queer the performance of queerness itself. She accomplishes this in "Applause", by demonstrating that queerness is not necessarily centered around sexuality. By doing this, she undermines the expectation of queer performance in pop music. "Applause" reveals that queerness is not simply an artistic phase, and that fan involvement is a central part of queer performance. In this sense, the influence of Gaga's queer performance extends to her fandom, who attempt to emulate her performances. Finally, "Applause" raises important questions regarding what it means to perform queerness authentically. While for many critics performing queerness relies on being queer, Gaga offers a new lens through which to understand queer performance in pop music.

Chapter 4

Objectifying Queer Performance

This chapter interrogates the consequences of perceiving queerness in pop music purely as a performance. By examining various pop music artists, I explore the complex relationship between performing queerness, pop music and music criticism. I explore the objectification of queerness through a heteronormative lens through an analysis of Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down," as well as Kary Perry's "I Kissed a Girl." Both songs raise question surrounding the fetishization of queerness by otherwise heteronormative artists. I define objectification as the process by which queerness and queer identities are reduced to objects, which allow generalizations about queer identities to propagate. I further define fetishization as the idea that queer individuals express their identities purely in a sexual manner. Additionally, through an exploration of queer pop, this chapter seeks to engage in the questions introduced in Chapter 1: If our understanding of queerness is now largely based on extreme performances, then what are the consequences for queer performances by queer artists who do not abide by the grandiose, extravagant and over the top performances that we have come to expect from mainstream queerness? Indeed, queer pop provides a space for the consumption and production of queer performances by queer artists. I introduce and question the category of "queer pop" as a means to promote the performance of being queer. At the core of these analyses is the question of authenticity: what does it mean to be and perform queerness authentically? While this chapter does not seek to answer this question directly, it does set out to

provide an explanation of the changing expectations of what it means to be authentically queer in pop music.

Queerbaiting with Female-Female Sexuality: Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl"¹⁸¹

This section will focus on the consequences of queerbaiting in pop music as it relates to queer performance. The analysis will demonstrate how queerbaiting¹⁸² complicates and objectifies queerness, by focusing on heteronormative queerness.¹⁸³ Queerbaiting in popular music endangers the possibility of performing and being queer outside voyeuristic displays of sexuality. To further demonstrate the objectification of queerness through queerbaiting, this section will focus on one particular pop song released during the past decade. Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" sparked vast controversy around both queer performance and queerbaiting. The song was accused of using queerness as a passing phase, thereby diminishing the lived experiences of queer women.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ "Katy Perry - I Kissed A Girl (Official)," Katy Perry, June 10, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAp9BKosZXs>.

¹⁸² Queerbaiting is a term used to describe the objection to the use of queer elements or characters in movies, media and music in order to appeal to the queer community without explicitly allowing queerness to thrive. The tactic of queerbaiting -especially in popular music- involves women to women relations which are often trivialized to accommodate the male gaze rather than provided any real legitimacy. Verge, "When Pop Culture Pretends to Be Gay."

¹⁸³ As introduced in Chapter 1, heteronormative queerness – that is queerness performed through a heteronormative lens – strips queer performance of its oppositional strength and objectifies queerness as a spectacle. I perceive heteronormative queerness as a behaviour akin to artistic performance, rather than cultural or everyday performance. In other words, heteronormative queerness is a conscious use and embodiment of queer aesthetic and elements in popular media.

¹⁸⁴ Jude Rogers, "On Music: Katy Perry — Voice of No Angel," *Rock's Backpages*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/on-music-katy-perry--voice-of-no-angel>; Sheryl Garratt, "Katy Perry: Kiss Me, Katy," *Rock's Backpages*, August 10, 2008, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/katy-perry-kiss-me-katy>.

Closely linked with the rise of pink capitalism,¹⁸⁵ queerbaiting was a term initially used by queer fans and online communities to identify media that vaguely referred to queer content (such as a queer relationship or character) that was subsequently not explored in the course of the narrative.¹⁸⁶ Judith Fathallah claims that a key element of queerbaiting is reinstating a heteronormative narrative that “poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes.”¹⁸⁷ In academia, this phenomenon has been closely studied by scholars of popular media, especially film and television.¹⁸⁸ Pop music is not immune to the tactic of queerbaiting, especially with female to female sexuality. In a reading of contemporary media, Lisa Diamond states that queerbaiting with female sexuality can lead to various possibilities.¹⁸⁹ The first possibility indicates that queerness is packaged “specifically to attract and titillate young male viewers.”¹⁹⁰ Second, queerbaiting often presents queerness as a phase designed to confirm the listener’s “*essential* heterosexuality.”¹⁹¹ Consistent with the latter is the idea that queerness is an “add-on” to heterosexuality, thereby trivializing and depoliticizing queerness.¹⁹² Trivialization in this instance occurs when queer identities are treated as

¹⁸⁵ The incorporation of queer elements into marketing strategies, rebranding and selling has become known as “pink capitalism.” Pink capitalism recognizes that queer communities, allies and subcultures have enough purchasing power to have brands and markets specifically dedicated to them.

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Brennan, “Queerbaiting: The ‘playful’ possibilities of homoeroticism,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 189.

¹⁸⁷ Judith Fathallah, “Moriarty’s ghost: or the queer disruption of the BBC’s *Sherlock*,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 2 (July 2014): 491.

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Bridges, “A genealogy of queerbaiting: Legal codes, production codes, ‘bury your gays’ and ‘The 100 mess’,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 115-132; Eve Ng, “Between text, paratext, and context: Queerbaiting and the contemporary media landscape,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017): 1-25; Judith Fathallah, “Moriarty’s ghost: or the queer disruption of the BBC’s *Sherlock*,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 2 (July 2014): 491.

¹⁸⁹ Lisa M. Diamond, “‘I’m Straight, but I Kissed a Girl’: The Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality,” *Feminism & Psychology* 15, no. 1 (February 2005): 104–10.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

secondary to heterosexual identities, while depoliticization happens when being queer is shown as purely a sexual act, rather than as a way to counter heteronormativity.

Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" made her an "overnight success."¹⁹³ "I Kissed a Girl" certainly appealed to male viewers, as Jude Rogers points out in a review.¹⁹⁴ The music video for "I Kissed a Girl" featured highly sexualized female models, including Perry herself. The single relied on the performance of a stereotypical good girl defying her Christian morals by kissing a girl.¹⁹⁵ Perry initially brushed off accusations of queerbaiting by stating, "What happened to being rock 'n' roll?"¹⁹⁶ Perry effectively equates queer experiences and experimentation as a rebellious act against heteronormativity through her claim that she was being rock 'n' roll. Diamond points out that the narrative that Perry sings about is certainly not new to popular media. Depictions of female to female sexuality have often been justified as experimentation in order to validate one's heterosexuality.¹⁹⁷ In other words, female characters *know* they are not queer, because they "tried it."¹⁹⁸ In Perry's case, she firmly asserts in her lyrics that she "liked it."

"I kissed a girl" troubles the boundaries of being queer and performing queerness. For Perry, "I kissed a girl" is a site of experimentation, where she gets to perform her rebellion against her conservative upbringing.¹⁹⁹ In turn, her subversive attitude is

¹⁹³ Sheryl Garratt, "Katy Perry: Kiss Me, Katy," *Rock's Backpages*, August 10, 2008, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/katy-perry-kiss-me-katy>.

¹⁹⁴ Jude Rogers, "On Music: Katy Perry — Voice of No Angel," *Rock's Backpages*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/on-music-katy-perry--voice-of-no-angel>

¹⁹⁵ Perry has cited numerous times that she grew up in a strict Christian household and was a frequent attendee of her church's youth sessions.

Rogers, "On Music: Katy Perry — Voice of No Angel."

¹⁹⁶ Sheryl Garratt, "Katy Perry: Kiss Me, Katy."

¹⁹⁷ Diamond, "'I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl,'" 105.

¹⁹⁸ Diamond, "'I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl,'" 106.

¹⁹⁹ Sheryl Garratt, "Katy Perry: Kiss Me, Katy."

presented in a highly sexualized setting, both visually and sonically. Visually, the music video does not explicitly feature two females kissing. Instead, it is Perry's taunting sexual mannerism and poses that gives the video its provocative, sexual nature. Sonically, Perry's flirtatious tone lends this experimental experience to be perceived as arousing to her audience. In other words, both visually and sonically, "I kissed a girl" equates being queer with a performance based on risqué sexual displays. The fetishization of female to female sexuality occurs through Perry's sexualization, which allows for the objectification of queerness. In that sense, Perry's song adheres to heterosexual expectations, rather than defying them.²⁰⁰

In her discussion of Perry's "I Kissed a Girl," Sheryl Garratt called the controversy around Perry "a search for things to be offended by."²⁰¹ Subsequently, Perry claimed that she was simply portraying "sisterly" acts, or the way girls behave when growing up.²⁰² Garratt argues further that many have misinterpreted the song because it is simply about being curious and not about sexual orientation.²⁰³ Diamond addresses this claim indirectly by stating that female celebrities have often maintained that they *could* pursue same-sex relationships, but "*they simply decided otherwise.*"²⁰⁴ Diamond discusses ideas about heteronormative privilege, where Perry can choose to pursue a heteronormative relationship without persecution or the risk of endangering her career. More than just a site of experimentation, "I kissed a girl" is a heteronormatively queer performance. In other words, Perry performs queerness by objectifying it as a sexual

200 Jane Campbell and Theresa Carilli, *Queer Media Images: LGBT Perspectives* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 79.

²⁰¹ Sheryl Garratt, "Katy Perry: Kiss Me, Katy."

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Diamond, "'I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl,'" 108.

performance, while infantilizing being queer as nothing more than fleeting sexual experimentations.

The Politics of Performing Queer: Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down”²⁰⁵

The political landscape of many countries in regard to queer politics has shifted in the past few years.²⁰⁶ Pop artists have been at the forefront of this political shift as they advocate for queer rights openly through both their music and their social media platforms. Indeed, popular music artists have often prospered by disrupting gender and sexual norms. Iconic artists such as Madonna, Cher, Grace Jones and Prince thrived from their gender-bending spectacles and music. Many current pop artists follow in their footsteps. As previously stated, Bowie’s and Gaga’s performances put heavy emphasis on “being different,” and in doing so, were able to defy the rigid structures of “what was ‘in’.”²⁰⁷ Queerness in pop music has often been perceived as trendy. This is especially true in today’s pop music industry, where a mainstream artist’s acceptance is dependent on “*signifying* queerness rather than *being* queer.”²⁰⁸

For Hawkins, signifying queerness is a form of appropriation in which appearing as an illustration of queerness takes precedence over representation. In other words, it suffices to mention support for queer communities than to question the lack of queer artists. He concludes that signifying queerness “has very little to do” with being aware of

²⁰⁵ “Taylor Swift – You Need to Calm Down,” Taylor Swift, June 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY>.

²⁰⁶ Queer politics are concerned with the issues that affect LGBTQ+ communities and fights for their rights and freedoms to be lawfully upheld.

²⁰⁷ Stan Hawkins, “On Male Queering in the Mainstream Pop,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006), 282.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

queer political issues.²⁰⁹ Hawkins' assertion is evident in the current pop music landscape through the performance of allyship. Allyship is the support that any individual provides on issues that affect the queer community at large.²¹⁰ Pop artists often identify as queer allies, especially in the midst of controversial issues.²¹¹ Queer performances thus pose a dilemma for many ally artists, because queer performances can often "undermine the subversive" aspect of queer politics.²¹² That is, queer performance can strip queerness of its political rebelliousness, and objectify queerness as merely a spectacle.

The objectification of queerness by an ally can be seen through Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down," both in the music video and song. The problem of objectification occurs primarily due to three aspects of Swift's single: timing, performance and authenticity. First, the single was conveniently released in June of 2019, in the middle of pride month. "You Need to Calm Down" debuted as a no. 2 spot on the Billboard's Hot 100 debut. Criticism arose due to the timing of the song and music video release during Pride month, which enabled Swift to profit from the additional publicity Pride month would provide.²¹³ Secondly, Swift's music video included an array of queer icons and celebrities. However, the voyeuristic aspect of the music video raised important questions surrounding the fetishization of queerness in pop music. Finally, critics targeted

²⁰⁹ Stan Hawkins, "On Male Queering in the Mainstream Pop," 282.

²¹⁰ Glenda M. Russell, and Janis S. Bohan, "Institutional allyship for LGBT equality: Underlying processes and potentials for change," *Journal of Social Issues* 72, no. 2 (2016): 335-354.

²¹¹ Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Rita Ora apologizes after LGBT criticism of her song Girls," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018; Tom Lamont, "Harry Styles: 'I'm not just sprinkling in sexual ambiguity to be interesting,'" *The Guardian*, December 14, 2019.

²¹² Stan Hawkins, "On Male Queering in the Mainstream Pop," 282.

²¹³ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, "For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?" *New York Times*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/arts/music/taylor-swift-you-need-to-calm-down-video.html>; Spencer Kornhaber, "The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift's 'You Need to Calm Down'," *The Atlantic*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/taylor-swift-you-need-calm-down-hijacks-queerness/591829/>

Swift for her lack of authenticity in supporting the queer community at large.²¹⁴ “You Need to Calm Down” was accused of being a trendy façade, lacking any true concern for queer politics.

“You Need to Calm Down” offers a neatly packaged spectacle as well as a loud and colorful display of allyship on behalf of Swift. The objectification of queerness occurs in Swift’s single when it profits off a “trendy” component. The objectification is amplified when Swift is singled out by critics for a clear lack of support for queer politics prior to the release of her single.²¹⁵ Indeed, the surge of “pink capitalism” around Pride month is an increasing issue. Big corporations seem to spend June proudly displaying their rainbow flags and announcing their inclusion of all sexualities and orientations. Pink capitalism again makes queer politics trendy, most intensely during the month of June every year. The fact that Swift’s “You need to calm down” does very little to tackle the trendiness of queerness, but rather profits from it is precisely what the critiques attempt to point out. Indeed, “You Need to Calm Down” demonstrates that as in most marketing tactics, money is perhaps the driving force, rather than “liberation.”²¹⁶

In his analysis of sexual diversity in pop music videos, Frederik Dhaenens states that queer-oriented music videos are often a means to “fortify ties” and establish a “gay-

²¹⁴ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, “For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?” *New York Times*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/arts/music/taylor-swift-you-need-to-calm-down-video.html>; Spencer Kornhaber, “The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need to Calm Down’,” *The Atlantic*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/taylor-swift-you-need-calm-down-hijacks-queerness/591829/>

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, 112.

friendly” image with queer fan bases.²¹⁷ Certainly, the “performative nature”²¹⁸ of “You Need To Calm Down” established Swift as an ally, but the type of queer performance she promotes and displays is questionable. The music video includes a legion of queer celebrities, from drag queens to Ellen DeGeneres, from Adam Lambert to Billy Porter. Queer performance is shown here as both cultural and artistic performance. The music video includes queer celebrities in everyday activities as well as in onstage performances such as drag. At its base however, the music video presents a type of queer village or utopia, where it attempts to provide a mediated representation of queer lives and issues. This unattainable utopia is presented through a heteronormatively queer lens. Indeed, Swift presents a version of queerness that is all too common in pop music; an exaggerated performance of what it means to be queer.

“You Need To Calm Down” turns queerness into a spectacle. In other words, it again reflects an extreme version of queer performance, performed from a heteronormative point of view. Swift’s songs generally promote stereotypes of heterosexual romance between football player and a cheerleader (“You Belong with Me”), princess and prince (“Love Story”), and bad boys and good girls (“Style”). The broader message of the music video is the insinuation that celebrities are persecuted on a comparable level as the queer community.²¹⁹ It is important to note these queer celebrities did not participate in the songwriting process. Indeed, their appearance in the music video were purely performative. In other words, queerness is objectified and

²¹⁷ Frederik Dhaenens, “Reading Gay Music Videos: An Inquiry into the Representation of Sexual Diversity in Contemporary Popular Music Videos,” *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 5 (December 2016): 533.

²¹⁸ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, “For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?”

²¹⁹ Spencer Kornhaber, “The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need to Calm Down’”

paraded in “You Need To Calm Down” in order to promote and justify a form of heteronormative queerness.

New York Time’s Caryn Ganz succinctly argues that “she’s telling, not showing.”²²⁰ Swift announces her allyship through the video, loudly and clearly. However, the song itself provides very little indication of her political support for queer communities. “You Need to Calm Down” neatly avoids being too political for her heteronormative fanbase, with its vague lyrics. The vagueness creates a double entendre where the underlying message could be easily read as being about “online haters.”²²¹ With lyrics such as “Say it in the street, that's a knock-out, but you say it in a Tweet, that's a cop-out,” it is difficult to find Swift’s political support for queer communities in “You Need to Calm Down.” Swift’s strategy relies on an inherent trait of pop music in modern society; they are most commonly heard, not seen through their music videos. Currently, per YouTube’s count, the music video has been viewed around 170 million times, while the song has been streamed on Spotify alone over 300 million times. In showing her allyship in such an extravagant way, Swift presents herself as a voice for queer politics, while simultaneously silencing and parading the queer people she claims to support.

The issue of allyship provides an ideal avenue to interrogate problems of authenticity, especially in pop music. The harshest criticism directed towards Swift questions her claim to be an authentic supporter of queer politics and communities. Underlying all the tension surrounding Swift’s authenticity is the question of “who ‘gets’

²²⁰ Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, “For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?”

²²¹ Spencer Kornhaber, “The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift’s ‘You Need to Calm Down’”

to be an ally...?”²²² The questioning of Swift’s sudden support for queer communities is indeed reasonable, especially when allies who are deemed as authentic (Lady Gaga, Madonna, Robyn etc) have had queerness woven into their aesthetic from the start. Swift’s understanding of queer politics echoes Hawkin’s statement, that signifying queerness “has very little to do” with being politically aware of queer issues.²²³ However, the issue of authenticity points to a larger question in the current landscape of pop music: what does it mean to authentically perform queerness?

In a comparison of “You Need To Calm Down” to Robyn’s “Ever Again,” Ganz points to some elements of queer authenticity. Robyn’s queer authenticity relies on the acceptance and validation from queer communities²²⁴, rather than a self-appointed title. To Ganz, Swift’s performance was “a kandy-kolored fantasyscape populated by 29 other personalities.”²²⁵ Robyn’s performance was depicted as raw and highly skilled in her choreography. While Swift’s music video screams loudly and proudly about queer politics, Robyn does not explicitly mention queer issues. Robyn allows her queer fanbase to dictate whether or not her performances were authentically queer. Ganz states that “Robyn has always showed, not told. Beloved gay pop isn’t always wrapped in rainbows, but in exuberance, rawness, poise, virtuosity...”²²⁶ Ganz points to the issue that pop music struggles with queer performance; over the top and extravagant elements often undermines and objectifies queer performances. What makes Robyn authentic in this case is the simplicity of her queer performance and the validation from queer communities.

²²² Jon Caramanica, Wesley Morris and Caryn Ganz, “For Taylor Swift, Is Ego Stronger Than Pride?”

²²³ Hawkins, “On Male Queering in the Mainstream Pop,” 282.

²²⁴ Jake Hall, “Why Robyn is a queer icon,” *INTOMORE*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.intomore.com/culture/why-robyn-is-a-queer-icon>.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

The extremes dilute queer performance. Robyn is not displaying and parading queerness with rainbow flags, she is simply performing her version of what it means to be queer, and allowing her fans to identify with her queer performance.

Queer Pop

McClary's analysis of Franz Schubert was one of the first and most prominent instances of queer musical analysis.²²⁷ Suggesting that Schubert's music was queer sparked controversy in the field of musicology. McClary interrogation tackled the question of what makes music queer? Do queer artists consistently write queer music? These questions remain highly important for present-day popular music. I suggest that a fundamental understanding of the difference between being and performing is crucial to interrogating music that is perceived as queer. We must therefore unravel what is meant by "queer pop." Indeed, our understandings of queer performance are challenged when we consider that the extreme performances of queerness are unsustainable. Such performances are far removed from the lived experiences of queer communities, thus othering queerness even further. Finally, this section explores the performance of *being* queer in pop music, and the emerging challenges this performance faces as a result of current expectations.

Queer music can be understood in more complexity, especially in queer musicology. Cusick frames sexual identity as musical. She suggests that we relate to music in similar ways in which we relate to our sexual identities.²²⁸ For Cusick,

²²⁷ Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay And Lesbian Musicology*, ed. P. Brett, E. Wood, and G. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 205-233.

²²⁸ Susan Cusick, "On a lesbian relationship with music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay And Lesbian Musicology*, ed. P. Brett, E. Wood, and G. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70.

queerness is interpreted differently in that queer allows for a new way of illustrating one's sexuality beyond just a sexual act.²²⁹ Queer music in this sense serves to communicate to others one's own queerness without acknowledging a particular sexual orientation. Pop music indeed demonstrates a particular type of queer performance, which is informed by a heteronormative perspective as demonstrated previously. The challenge occurs when we consider that pop music rarely features queer artists who put on performances centered around *being* queer. Performances of queerness are often informed by previous performances by non-queer individuals, as pointed out with Lady Gaga's performances. While such a tactic may not be an issue at first, it causes obstacles as it begins to other and alienate queer individuals and communities even further.

In his article on queer music in the 1980s, Lucas Hilderbrand observes that terms such as "queer music," "queer pop" and "gay music" are often read as synonyms.²³⁰ Hilderbrand goes further to say that although used as synonyms, these terms often do not encapsulate the same caliber, genre or even message of a particular group of music. For example, he notes that while some songs had been popular in gay dance clubs and press, they did not "function as specifically" as anthems such as Carl Bean's "I Was Born This Way" or Tom Robinson's "Glad to Be Gay."²³¹ Hilderbrand points out further that queer music shifted in the 1980s, from "gay affirmation to queer transgression."²³²

Chapter 2 delved into how Bowie pioneered much of the work on queer performance. Bowie's performances were artistically queer in the way he presented

²²⁹ Cusick, "On a lesbian relationship with music," 75.

²³⁰ Lucas Hilderbrand, "'Luring Disco Dollies to a Life of Vice': Queer Pop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 4 (2013): 417.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

himself and his various personas. Through this artistic rendition of queerness, he became an icon for the queer community, and for queerness in general. Following in his footsteps, Lady Gaga used social platforms and the rise of online communities to better communicate her message of acceptance to her fans. Gaga's message encourages her fans to accept their differences, speaking especially to marginalized groups such as victims of bullying and the queer community. While both Bowie and Gaga's contribution to pop music cannot be ignored, queer fans demand a different approach to pop music nowadays. Similar to Bowie, Gaga leads a publicly heterosexual life. In the midst of debates about queerbaiting and "gay for pay," queer fans have become attuned to the behaviour of artists who simply identify as queer, but do not live as such.²³³

Understanding how popular media interprets queer music in general is crucial to understanding how the cultural common sense about queer music evolves. First, we must reconcile the ways in which we can judge and categorize queerness in music. Visually speaking, we can see and interpret queerness from aesthetic elements such as hairstyles, clothing, set designs, and accessories. Performatively, queerness is acknowledged through the performance of cultural or artistic queerness. Finally, we have yet to understand the parameters within which to determine queerness sonically. There is no single style, form, rhythmic, melodic motives or even genre that "exclusively pertains to one particular sexuality..."²³⁴ As such, popular media rarely discusses the auditory elements that make music queer. Instead, it relies on aesthetic and performative factors to guide its classification. Thus, for popular culture and its audience, for music to be

²³³ Spencer Kornhaber, "The Queasy Double Message of Taylor Swift's 'You Need to Calm Down'"

²³⁴ Jodie Taylor, "Taking it in the ear: On musico-sexual synergies and the (queer) possibility that music is sex," *Continuum* 26, no. 4 (2012): 605.

considered queer, it simply needs to feature – visually or lyrically – a queer artist.

Popular media interprets queer music as music written and sung by queer artists. Indeed, popular culture understands the category of queer music relative to the artist performing queerness, rather than *being* queer despite the fact that the two often do not coincide.

Queer pop is an emerging category catering to queer artists and fans. Queer pop is a term coined by popular media to indicate music featuring queer artists specifically.²³⁵ Much like Hilderbrand’s analysis, the term queer pop remains synonymous with LGBT music in today’s pop culture. Mentions of queer music and artists are most often accompanied with specific mention of their LGBTQ affiliation, or a clear mention of their sexual identity.²³⁶ Most importantly, queer pop presents a style of music that renders “coyness...unnecessary.”²³⁷ Angela Watercutter of the online magazine *Wired* states that queer pop allows queer artists to “sing about their lived experiences, and to raise awareness of the LGBTQ+ community’s struggles...”²³⁸ Watercutter explores why queer pop has become “so ubiquitous” suddenly.²³⁹

Crediting online communities, Watercutter observes that online fandoms have guided the narrative surrounding queer pop. Indeed, this online phenomenon is common for artists who have used queerness in their aesthetic. As discussed previously, Lady Gaga’s fan base exists primarily as an online community. Gaga herself spends a considerable amount of time communicating directly with her fans through various social

²³⁵ Angela Watercutter, “A New Age of Queer Pop Is Here—And Artists Want to Talk,” *Wired*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/queer-pop-revolution/>

²³⁶ Angela Watercutter, “A New Age of Queer Pop Is Here—And Artists Want to Talk,” *Wired*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/queer-pop-revolution/>

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

media platforms. The online queer community has been vocal about pop music and other forms of media that use queer elements. Several scholars have noted that the rise of social media platforms made marginalized groups, such as the queer community, more educated and socially aware. Queer communities are thus less likely to be “queerbaited” and are quick to recognize when pop music is merely using queerness for profits.²⁴⁰ With this inquisitive and aware queer audience, queer pop is seen as a far more authentic version of queer lives than other pop music is. Wattercutter notes that “online presence and straightforward lyrics” has helped queer artists in portraying their authentic selves.²⁴¹ Elena Marris states that queer fandoms find meaning in who the artists are authentically.²⁴² Marris speaks of the type of authenticity I mentioned in Chapter 1; that queer audiences prefer that queer music be written and performed by a queer artist. Queer fandoms find authenticity in an artist who lives as a queer individual and faces similar challenges. As such, queer pop presents the ideal space for both queer artists and fans to perform, participate and engage in queerness authentically.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the objectification of queerness relies heavily on a voyeuristic display of queerness by pop artists. Using her song “I Kissed a Girl” as a site of experimentation, Perry trivializes and infantilizes the lived experiences of queer women, while simultaneously adhering and appealing to a heteronormative audience. Similarly, “You Need to Calm Down” parades queerness as a spectacle, while also

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Angela Wattercutter, “A New Age of Queer Pop Is Here—And Artists Want to Talk,” *Wired*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/queer-pop-revolution/>

silencing queer voices and issues. In displaying an artistic version of queer performance, pop music has succeeded in creating a version of queerness that is far removed from the lived experiences of the queer community. The performance of *being* queer is therefore alienated from the mainstream pop music scene. Queer pop has the potential to provide a much-needed space for queer artists to perform an authentic version of queerness.

Authenticity in queer pop can be defined as an artist who identifies, lives, sings and performs their real-life lived experiences as a queer individual. Unfortunately, this kind of authentically queer pop music has not yet received a mainstream audience. As we approach a “new age”²⁴³ of music, both academia and popular media must begin to interrogate the performances that pop artists promote, as well as how they potentially complicate queerness.

²⁴³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Queering the Future of Musicology

For many pop artists, queer is what they do, not who they are. They perform queerness, rather than identify with it as a state of being. In realizing that pop music performs queerness most commonly, we must begin to interrogate how the performance of queerness has shaped our understanding of what it means to *be* queer. The research I present here suggest that popular culture's understanding of queerness relies on a heteronormative lens, whereby queerness is objectified and paraded primarily as an artistic performance. In other words, queerness is recognized only when displayed in its extremes, as in the performances of David Bowie, Lady Gaga, Katy Perry or more recently, Taylor Swift. However, understanding that queer performance has been influenced by a heteronormative perspective raises questions about society's perception of performing and being queer.

David Bowie provided an excellent case study to demonstrate how society has come to define the boundaries and parameters of queerness within which artists and musicians should perform. As Auslander points out, Bowie's fans often emulated him, to the point of mimicking his costumes, behaviours and hairstyles. My analysis demonstrates that Bowie's influence rested in his ability to create a space where his fans were able to perform queerness, without necessarily being queer. As such, Bowie's performances have come to form our expectation of what a queer performance should look like. Continuing his legacy, Lady Gaga's tribute to Bowie demonstrates her ability to not only adhere to the queer template of Bowie's, but also to defy expectations. Gaga demonstrates the nuances of queer performance through her single "Applause." For Gaga

queerness is both a performance and a part of her identity, making her an ideal candidate to navigate the blurred lines between performing and being queer. Understanding that queer performances in pop music were performed at an extreme raises important question regarding the performance of being queer. Thus, I explored the consequences for the performance of being queer when popular culture's understanding of queerness has been guided only through the extreme depiction of queerness. Both Taylor Swift's "You need to calm down" and Katy Parry's "I Kissed a Girl" reveal a voyeuristic quality in how pop music presents queerness and queer individuals. Finally, I explored queer pop as a possible space for queer performances by queer artists to flourish. Queer pop presents an opportunity to redefine both the act of performing and being queer. In summary, through an analysis rooted in the difference between *being* and *performing*, this thesis demonstrated that popular music adheres to a heteronormative narrative that ultimately objectifies queerness and promotes an extreme version of queer performance.

During the course of this thesis, I noted several questions that remain unanswered and unexplored at the intersection of musicology and queer theory. Issues raised by being and performing queerness outside the bounds of western pop music could potentially reveal interesting avenues for future research. Queerness is a cultural phenomenon, and as such, I believe it would be interesting to unravel how the cultural common sense of queerness develops in other cultures. Conservative cultures (compared to the United Kingdom or North America) such as South Korea would prove to be intriguing particularly when their main music industry (K-Pop) uses various elements of queerness in their performances. How does such a conservative society negotiate queerness both as state of being and as a performance? What does the performance of queerness look and

sound like, when being queer remains commonly frowned upon or outright illegal? Do these conservative societies perceive queerness the same way western countries do? Do they have expectations surrounding queer performance? How does a more traditional society than North America negotiate the boundaries of queer performance in pop music? Certainly, an ethnomusicological perspective would be helpful in understanding queerness and its evolution in conservative eastern countries.

Moreover, McClary's analysis of Schubert's queerness through his music remain relevant today, even 26 years after the publication of McClary's analysis. Do queer artists write queer music consistently? Are there sonic elements that differentiate queer music from non-queer music? I believe there is a lot to uncover when it comes to identifying the elements that make music inherently queer. Furthering McClary's assertions would require expanding into areas of celebrity culture, online communities, social media culture as well as fan culture. How do fans – whether queer or not – personally identify with queer artists? What role does celebrity and social media culture have to play in the performance of queerness? On what level is queerness emulated by today's music fans? Are fans as invested in queerness as many once were with artists such as David Bowie? Additionally, it is crucial that our understanding of queer itself evolves as we realize that to be queer or to perform queerness is sometime part of a popular or mainstream narrative. As I noted in Chapter 1, we burden the word "queer" perhaps too much. In order to speak about queerness and music in more decipherable terms, we must acknowledge the limits of the word "queer," and realize when and if the word is simply a placeholder for the definition that best fits in the moment.

Finally, the issue of authenticity was a question that occurred time and time again during the course of this research. Authenticity in queer performances is certainly an area that demands more understanding. I believe the question of what it means to be authentically queer still remains unanswered in many respects, especially in pop music. How should scholars begin to unravel the relationship between authenticity and queerness? Can queerness be authentic to begin with, especially when we consider that its effectiveness lies in its juxtaposition to the norm? Pop music complicates authenticity even further. Is it possible to be authentically queer, but to reject authentic queerness? What does an authentic queer performance constitute of? Is authenticity solely based on *being* queer? If so, what precisely defines a queer individual? Our understanding of queerness and popular music has evolved significantly in the past decade. This research has shown me that much work still needs to be accomplished in order to fully explore how queerness operates, especially in the pop music scene.

The broader aim of this thesis was to provide a new understanding of queerness in popular music. Throughout the analysis, important questions regarding queerness, performance as well as authenticity were recurring themes. I believe that our understanding of queerness as both a state of being and an act of performance needs to be refined further. As our current culture adapts to shifting trends regarding queerness, musicologists and queer theorists alike need to rethink how to conceptualize queerness. Ultimately, perhaps Jack Halberstam's understands the study of queerness in popular music best in stating that queer culture "needs to be reckoned with on its own terms."²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ Jack Halberstam, "What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (September 2003): 315.

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