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Kooijman, J.

**DOI**

[10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888)

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Popular music and society

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Kooijman, J. (2019). Fierce, Fabulous, and In/Famous: Beyoncé as Black Diva. *Popular music and society*, 42(1), 6-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888>

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To cite this article: Jaap Kooijman (2019) Fierce, Fabulous, and In/Famous: Beyoncé as Black Diva, *Popular Music and Society*, 42:1, 6-21, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1555888>



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Published online: 12 Dec 2018.



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## Fierce, Fabulous, and In/Famous: Beyoncé as Black Diva

Jaap Kooijman


Media Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how the notion of the diva positions Beyoncé's star image within a larger tradition of black female superstardom at three different levels: (1) Beyoncé's performances as black divas from the past, such as Tina Turner and Diana Ross; (2) Beyoncé's challenging of the conventional definition of the diva in her 2009 "Diva" music video; and (3) Beyoncé's assumed status as a gay icon, including in the documentary *Waiting for B.* (directed by Paulo Cesar Toledo and Abigail Spindel, 2015). In this way, the concept of the diva can be used productively to discuss Beyoncé's star image, while simultaneously recognizing its restrictive character.

When, in a 2001 interview with *COSMOgirl*, Beyoncé Knowles is asked if she is a diva like Diana Ross, she explains why she does not appreciate the comparison: "That sounds cool, because she's wonderful and glamorous. But people don't mean it in the nice way. They call me that because I'm the lead singer, so they think I'm a diva and go around kicking people out of the group" (qtd. in [Pointer](#) 59).

Earlier that year, Beyoncé and her group Destiny's Child were featured on the cover of *Vibe* magazine (February 2001). Shot by Vincent Skeltis, the black-and-white photograph mimics a well-known 1968 publicity picture of the Supremes, with Beyoncé as Diana Ross. Flanked by her singing partners Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams, Beyoncé strikes a classic diva pose, raising one arm triumphantly in the air. Inside the magazine, an eight-page article entitled "Divas Live!" discusses the group's success, but also how "their lineup changes rival that of the Supremes," suggesting that Destiny's Child is merely a "vehicle designed to promote Beyoncé's inevitable solo career" ([Arambula](#) 78). The cover and the article foreshadow the trajectory Beyoncé indeed would follow. Like Diana Ross, who left the Supremes for a solo career in music and film, as well as the Ross-inspired fictional character Deena Jones in the 1981 Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*, Beyoncé left Destiny's Child in 2003 to go solo and star in several Hollywood movies, including the role of Deena in the film version of *Dreamgirls* (directed by Bill Condon, 2006). From the start, Beyoncé's star image was perceived within the narrative of the black diva leaving her singing group behind to achieve superstardom – even before she actually did so – and starring in *Dreamgirls* reconfirmed this diva narrative both on- and off-screen.

**CONTACT** Jaap Kooijman  [J.W.Kooijman@uva.nl](mailto:J.W.Kooijman@uva.nl)

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Beyoncé's answer to *COSMOgirl* highlights what Kimberly Springer has called "the dual nature of divadom" (256), namely that the diva label has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, diva is used to recognize a talented female star who enthralls and inspires her audience, harking back to its original Italian meaning of "goddess" that was applied to female opera singers during the late nineteenth century, and later to celebrated actresses in theater and classic Hollywood, and eventually to singers of popular music (Leonardi and Pope 205–27; Lister). On the other hand, diva is also used to denounce the female star – "usually a woman of color" – as "unreasonable, unpredictable, and likely unhinged," and as someone "whose financial success has yielded excess" (Springer 257). Although diva has been applied to female stars of various ethnicities, there is a specific connection between the diva and black female performers, based both on the positive connotations of strength and survival within a white-dominated entertainment industry as well as on the negative connotations of excessive and unruly behavior, often based on racial stereotypes (Lockridge 1–18; Mask 7–9). Springer sees Diana Ross as "the template for contemporary notions of the diva as immensely talented but selfishly driven and difficult to deal with," an image to which Beyoncé is connected through her performance of Deena in *Dreamgirls*: "It is hard to separate legend from fact, but with her ascension from group singer to lead singer in the Supremes and the larger than life aspects of her film roles it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between Diana and the Diva" (256). Beyoncé's diva pose as "Diana" on the cover of *Vibe* magazine signifies both sides, the diva's talent and glamor as well as her manipulative character; legend has it that Ross would spread her arms as a dramatic gesture merely to block the faces of her fellow Supremes with her hands (Taraborrelli 182).

Recognizing Beyoncé as a diva also places her in a tradition of legendary black female stars: "All the divas from Josephine Baker to Beyoncé Knowles have been determined to prove that the black woman was to be taken seriously," writes Donald Bogle in his pivotal study on black female stardom; black divas "have demanded respect" (16). Such an assertive attitude also has been crucial to the long – and arguably dated – tradition of gay male diva worship. As several scholars have pointed out, the performance of the diva, celebrating the fabulousness of glamor and excess, has provided gay male fans with a sense of belonging, presenting a utopian alternative to the realities of everyday life and the promise of a better future (Doty; Farmer; Jennex 343–46). However, the diva is not just a possible source of inspiration for gay men, but quite often also a product of gay white male imaginations, as *Dreamgirls* makes perfectly clear. The three men responsible for the original musical, as well as the director of the film version starring Beyoncé, were all gay/bisexual white men, which might explain why *Dreamgirls* "reflects the camp, surreal view of black divas that is a significant part of the gay aesthetic" (George 44). This is another form of the dual nature of divadom, as the diva can function both as a figure of self-determination and empowerment as well as a clichéd representation or caricature in gay male diva worship. Moreover, the diva as caricature has been used by the entertainment industry to market female artists to mainstream audiences, of which the VH1 *Divas* televised concert series is the most obvious example. In 2000, Beyoncé performed with Destiny's Child as part of the VH1 *Divas 2000: A Tribute to Diana Ross* show – which, as the *New York Times* noted, was "dictated, diva style, by [Ross's] needs and impulses" (Pareles) – and solo as part of the

2003 VH1 *Divas Duets* show, performing “Dangerously in Love” as a full-fledged diva on her own.

Over two decades, Beyoncé has moved beyond the conventional image of the black diva to become a multifaceted global superstar. In this article, I return to some key moments in which the notion of the diva helped to shape Beyoncé’s star image. First, I will discuss how Beyoncé, through her performances, has paid tribute to the black divas who came before her, most notably Diana Ross and Tina Turner, which positioned her within a larger tradition of black female superstardom and solidified her star image by reconfirming her own diva narrative within the logic of the entertainment industry. Second, I will discuss the 2009 music video “Diva” in which Beyoncé – quite literally – challenges conventional definitions of the diva, using her alter ego Sasha Fierce to merge sexually provocativeness and the respectable diva within her star image. Third, I will discuss how Beyoncé has been perceived as a gay icon both in two gay glossy magazines as well as in the documentary *Waiting for B.* (directed by Paulo Cesar Toledo and Abigail Spindel, 2015), which follows a group of Brazilian gay male Beyoncé fans camping out in front of the Morumbi stadium in São Paulo for two months in the summer of 2013 before the Beyoncé concert. In this way, the dual nature of divadom can be made visible, exploring how the diva label has been employed to recognize Beyoncé’s success as a potential source of critique and empowerment on the one hand, as well as to contain her star image and curtail its power within pre-existing narratives of the entertainment industry on the other.

## Performing the Diva

In his review of the 2013 HBO documentary *Beyoncé: Life Is But a Dream*, Jody Rosen of *The New Yorker* recognizes Beyoncé as “by far the ‘blackest’ – musically and aesthetically – of all the post-Madonna pop divas; she represents African-American women’s anger and power like no one in popular culture since Aretha Franklin” (Rosen). The mentioning of these two quite different divas – Madonna and Franklin – is noteworthy, as in this way Beyoncé is not only connected to the trope of the celebrated female pop singer who enjoys excessive commercial success (like Madonna), but also to the racial stereotype of the “angry black woman,” as is suggested by the words “African-American women’s anger and power,” who refuses to be silenced (like Franklin). That Rosen uses Madonna as the key reference is also significant. Two decades earlier, at the height of so-called Madonna Studies, Ronald B. Scott placed Madonna “in the finest traditions of earlier black divas,” as “she has used her talent to place before the public both the socially relevant issue of racial attitudes and an alternative presentation of black culture,” only to come to a remarkable conclusion: “The fact that Madonna, unlike the divas before her, is a white female is irrelevant” (62). None of the “earlier black divas” are mentioned by name, leaving it unclear whether Scott is referring to the 1970s disco divas who often were not credited for their vocal work, or to famous black pop divas such as Diana Ross and Donna Summer (or even to Madonna’s contemporaries Janet Jackson and Whitney Houston). Either way, that Scott does not name them shows that Madonna’s whiteness *was* relevant. Whereas Madonna could be praised for incorporating the sounds and images of the black divas within her performances, black pop divas whose music and style

transcended the racially defined genre categories of the U.S. American entertainment industry could easily be criticized for not sounding “black enough,” as repeatedly happened to Ross and Houston (Kooijman, “True Voice” 308–09).

Beyoncé too can be placed “in the finest traditions of earlier black divas,” and like the relevance of Madonna’s whiteness, the fact that she is a black woman *is* relevant. Similar to Diana Ross, who throughout her career had recognized that “many black female entertainers who came before her, such as Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, and Dorothy Dandridge, paved her way to stardom” (Fleetwood 72–73), Beyoncé has paid tribute to her diva predecessors, performing as Josephine Baker and Tina Turner on stage and, on the movie screen, starring as the Ross-inspired character Deena Jones in *Dreamgirls* and the real-life Etta James in *Cadillac Records* (directed by Darnell Martin, 2008). Rather than building on the stardom of Madonna and Aretha Franklin, Beyoncé’s star image seems most explicitly inspired by Diana Ross and Tina Turner. As Farah Jasmin Griffin argues, “A powerful singer and equally dynamic dancer, Beyoncé has cultivated an image that alternates between the good Southern girl; the couture glamor of Baker, Horne, and Ross; and the highly sexualized, near-athletic dancing ability of Turner and, to a lesser degree, the young Josephine Baker” (138). Tellingly, following Diana Ross (March 1989) and Tina Turner (May 1993), Beyoncé’s was the third – and so far the last – black female singer to be featured on a *Vanity Fair* magazine single person cover (November 2005), an indication of superstardom, “particularly for African American stars who rarely saw their faces on the full cover of *Vanity Fair*” (Bogle 362). When performing Tina Turner’s “Proud Mary” as part of the 2005 Kennedy Center Honors tribute to the legendary singer and, together with Turner, at the 2008 Grammy Awards, Beyoncé did not simply mimic Turner’s trademark performance, but also showed how much her own live performances – specifically the revealing stage costumes and dance moves that highlight the singer’s legs – built on those of her diva predecessor.

By starring as Deena Jones in *Dreamgirls*, Beyoncé inevitably was connected to the star image of Diana Ross. Loosely based on the story of the Motown group the Supremes, *Dreamgirls* tells how the “authentic” black style of the 1960s girl group the Dreams is sacrificed for white mainstream commercial success when the “original” lead singer Effie White/Florence Ballard (played by Jennifer Hudson in the film version) is replaced by the less talented but more commercial sounding and looking Deena Jones/Diana Ross. The success of *Dreamgirls* has resulted in a revisionist interpretation of the real-life Supremes, with Ballard as “the truly gifted singer” and Ross as the “conniving and untalented” one (Warwick 159–60), or “the selfish bitch who wanted all the fame and glory for herself” (Douglas 96). However, as I have discussed in more detail elsewhere, although the musical’s main premise is the betrayal of “authentic” black culture, *Dreamgirls* (and the film version even more than the original stage production) merely uses this premise as a melodramatic backstory to present a spectacle of excessive glamor that celebrates rather than denounces the success of Deena and the Dreams (Kooijman, “Whitewashing” 108–11).

While supposedly less talented than her “authentic” black counterpart Effie, throughout *Dreamgirls* Deena is portrayed as a celebrated and glamorous performer whose self-determination and talent result in success, as is shown best by Deena’s spectacular musical numbers in the second half of the movie. “One Night Only” is first sung by Effie as a slow ballad in a jazz café (a Broadway interpretation of “authentic” soul),

highlighting her vocal performance. The discofied version by Deena and the Dreams, in contrast, is performed at a nightclub as a glamorous disco extravaganza, in front of an ecstatic audience, including drag queens dressed up as Deena. Wearing a shiny multi-colored flared jumpsuit and with a mane of curly black hair, Beyoncé channels both 1970s Diana Ross and disco diva Donna Summer. “One Night Only” is central to the film’s narrative, as Effie’s version is supposed to be her comeback, but the song is “stolen” from her and transformed into a disco hit for Deena, reinforcing the musical’s main premise that “authentic” black culture is replaced by “artificial” commercialism. However, the musical is a genre that emphasizes the spectacle of performance over plot; not surprisingly then, Deena’s extravagant performance, and not Effie’s slow version, defines the pleasure of *Dreamgirls*. The second significant performance by Deena is the ballad “Listen,” added to the film to give Beyoncé an equivalent to the musical’s show stopper “And I’m Telling You I’m Not Going,” sung by Effie. With the song, Deena proclaims her independence from her manager and husband Curtis. Deena is shown singing in the recording studio, this time with a focus on her vocals instead of her glamorous stage presence. “Listen” not only presents Deena as a self-determined woman, but also showcases her vocal prowess, thereby challenging the film’s initial notion that Deena is a less talented singer than Effie. Moreover, the performance ensures the audience that Beyoncé’s voice is just as powerful as the one of Jennifer Hudson. In the end, through the spectacle of the black diva who combines glamor and flamboyance with vocal prowess and success, it is Deena rather than Effie who embodies the “dream” that *Dreamgirls* presents.

Here it is helpful to return to Kimberly Springer’s notion of the dual nature of divadom, as Deena – and thus in extension Diana Ross and Beyoncé – foregrounds both sides of the black diva: at the level of the film’s narrative, Deena is unscrupulous and self-centered, while the spectacular musical numbers exhibit her talent and charisma. Back in 1982, one year after *Dreamgirls* premiered on Broadway, Richard Dyer described Ross’s performances as “ecstatic celebrations of the myth and magic of Diana Ross,” arguing that “her whole act is unreal, a fantasy,” and “an outrageous reveling in what success could feel like, but not how to achieve it” (36–37). Using similar words, Donald Bogle has explained why, during the late 1970s, Ross faced a critical backlash by suggesting that her success “may have unnerved part of White America because there was something unreal about her powers, something almost superhuman about her image and the effect she had on large audiences” (184). *Dreamgirls* not only celebrates the “unrealness” of Deena/Diana as a flamboyant spectacle, but also curtails its power by implying that the black diva’s success is at the expense of Effie and as such a betrayal of “authentic” black culture. In her essay on Diana Ross, Nicole Fleetwood uses “black celebrity icon” rather than “diva” to discuss how Ross and her record label Motown shaped her stardom, both musically and visually, inspired by black female performers as well as the glamorous photography of the (white) Hollywood star image. In this way, Diana Ross and her producers “were able to incorporate certain racial markers of difference into her image and persona while simultaneously cultivating her as an exemplar of cultural assimilation, luxury capitalism, and mainstream acceptability,” and as such provided “a model and blueprint for black popular musicians and entertainers [including Beyoncé] who follow her trajectory” (57). Instead of falling into the trap of perceiving such a strategy as a betrayal of “authentic” black culture (as



*Dreamgirls* does), Fleetwood shows how Diana Ross needed to negotiate carefully between different cultural forms to achieve superstardom as a black woman within a white-dominated entertainment industry.

When during the seventh annual BET (Black Entertainment Television) Awards show, broadcast live on 26 June 2007, Diana Ross received the Lifetime Achievement Award, she ended her acceptance speech by announcing that “I will do the diva master class for you,” and then performed her trademark diva pose by spreading her arms. The camera immediately moved to a close-up of Beyoncé enthusiastically applauding in the audience, and thus highlighting the connection between the “old” and the “new” diva. Beyoncé obviously had done the diva pose before in *Dreamgirls* as well as on the cover of *Vibe* magazine. However, both are set in the past, thereby including her within the tradition of black divas, yet not necessarily defining the Beyoncé star image of the present. That Beyoncé had moved on beyond *Dreamgirls* became clear by the performances at the BET Awards. The show opened with Jennifer Hudson singing “And I’m Telling You I’m Not Going” in duet with Jennifer Holliday, the Effie of the original *Dreamgirls* stage production. Beyoncé did not sing one of her *Dreamgirls* songs, but instead performed “Get Me Bodied” from her then-current *B’Day* album. The performance was a visual spectacle, with Beyoncé emerging from a golden robot suit, inspired by the female robot Maria from the classic German expressionist film *Metropolis* (directed by Fritz Lang, 1927). While her tributes to Tina Turner and her role as Deena/Diana in *Dreamgirls* connected Beyoncé to the black divas of the past, her performance at the BET Awards foreshadowed the way Beyoncé would question and redefine the conventional “diva” through performing her “Robo-Diva” persona (James 117), of which her 2009 music video “Diva” is the most explicit example.

## Redefining the Diva

Beyoncé’s “Diva” is the third single of her 2008 solo album *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, on which Beyoncé introduces her more sexually charged alter ego. In the 2009 *Beyoncé Diva: Behind the Scenes* special, broadcast by BET to promote the “Diva” music video, Beyoncé explains how she “wanted to give my fans both sides, because that’s who I am” by combining “innocent and pure and vulnerable songs” with “the really over-the-top, sexy, sassy, fiery songs that represent Sasha Fierce.” By presenting “Diva” as part of her “fierce” alter ego, Beyoncé incorporates the fabulousness of the conventional diva, but also redefines the diva within a hip-hop context. The musical basis of “Diva” is a staccato beat consisting of a snare drum and looped sped-up backing vocals chanting almost unintelligibly “I’m a-a diva (hey), I’m a-a, I’m a-a diva (hey),” reminiscent of the beat of the 2008 rap song “A Milli” by Lil Wayne – which, like “Diva,” was co-written and produced by Shondrae “Bangladesh” Crawford. The song then can be perceived as a female interpretation of masculine hip hop, as is emphasized by Beyoncé’s singing voice exclaiming: “Diva is a female version of a hustla.” The verses feature Beyoncé bragging in rap cadences about “divas getting money” and being “the number one diva in this game.” As Robin James has pointed out, the lyrics merely make explicit what the song does musically; the robotic “sonic hustle” challenges not only the masculinity of hip hop, but also the femininity of conventional definitions of the diva (118–19).



This redefining of the diva becomes even more apparent in the song's music video, directed by Melina Matsoukas. The five-second opening shot presents a dictionary-style lemma of the word "diva," in white typewriter letters on black screen with no sound, defined as "a successful and glamorous female performer or personality <a fashion diva>; especially: a female singer who has achieved popularity <pop diva>." The subsequent shots – in black-and-white – show a parking lot of an abandoned industrial warehouse, followed by a close-up of a car's trunk filled with unclothed and battered parts of white mannequins. The noise of cars passing by on the highway is interrupted by the sound of footsteps that introduce Beyoncé's stiletto heels and then her face, with her eyes hidden behind dangle shades. As Beyoncé struts toward the warehouse, the beat kicks in. Inside the warehouse, Beyoncé and two background dancers perform robotic dance moves, which seem to reinforce the song's monotonous sound and repetitive structure, thereby enhancing the music video's industrial sphere. However, the choreography itself is not repetitive; Beyoncé and the dancers strike different poses and make expressive hand gestures, while continuously changing into new fashionable haute couture outfits. The warehouse floor has become a catwalk, blurring the line between high-fashion models and mechanical robots. For a short moment, color appears, when Beyoncé (still in black-and-white) poses for a group of golden mannequins, reminiscent of the *Metropolis* robot suit she wore at the BET Awards performance. Both the mechanical sound of the music – the repetitiveness of the beat and the looped backing vocals – as well as the industrial factory-meets-fashion style of the visuals emphasize the way the "fashion diva" and the "pop diva" are manufactured, thus products of mechanical labor. As the "Diva" song stops, Beyoncé walks out of the warehouse, lights up a cigar, and throws the lighter into the parked car's trunk, making the car explode. Similar to the golden mannequins, the lighter's flame and the explosion are in full golden color while the overall image remains in black-and-white. The music video ends with Beyoncé walking confidently toward the camera, shown in slow-motion, with the first notes of her song "Video Phone" playing in the background, thereby explicitly including her new definition of the diva within her overall star image.

In her discussion of the "Diva" music video, [Aisha Damali Lockridge](#) calls Beyoncé "a faux Diva [who] situates herself intentionally within the male gaze and locks herself there of her own violation," only to be "constructed as a male fantasy of what a Diva should want to be: shallow and materialistic" (125–26). There is a contradiction in the way Lockridge perceives Beyoncé's agency, as she argues that the pop star *actively* presents her body in a position of *passive* objectification. Moreover, labeling Beyoncé "a faux Diva" ignores how the music video challenges the more conventional interpretation of diva, the glamor of the "fashion diva" and "pop diva" as defined in the opening shot, by presenting an over-the-top masculine alternative. Although Lockridge is right in recognizing that "Diva" – both the song and the music video – copies the style and aesthetics of masculine hip hop, she leaves little room for the interpretation that Beyoncé might be coopting and mocking the masculinity of hip hop rather than merely performing a male fantasy. [Robin James](#), in contrast, sees Beyoncé's "Diva" performance as an act of "kinging," a form of masculine drag that, as James quotes Jack Halberstam, "reads dominant masculinity and explodes its effects" (117) – which in the case of Beyoncé's "Diva" includes a literal explosion. While the song's lyrics critically reflect upon Beyoncé's feminine

star image as pop diva, the music video suggests that divas like Beyoncé are manufactured products: “The juxtaposition of these images with those lyrics implies that black pop divas *are* droids, programmed from adolescence to perform as hyperfeminine cyborgs” (James 120). According to Lockridge, Beyoncé is a “faux” diva because she presents herself as a commodity to be consumed by men; James argues the opposite by showing that Beyoncé’s “Robo-Diva” persona critiques rather than reinforces the way the black pop diva is defined within gendered and racial power structures.

Instead of debating whether or not she is a “faux” diva, by placing Beyoncé in a longer tradition of pop divas and black divas, the contradictions of the diva label can be made visible. Divas both challenge and reinforce dominant ideologies; divas are both commodities to be sold to large audiences and potentially critical figures of strength and inspiration. Back in 1989, John Fiske already showed how Madonna, as a commercially successful pop star, could function as a source of empowerment for teenage girls as well as an object of sexual desire for adult male *Playboy* readers (95–113). Three decades later, debates on Beyoncé center on a similar commodification-empowerment divide, a question Kai Arne Hansen raises in his aptly titled article “Empowered or Objectified?” in which he analyzes Beyoncé’s 2013 music video “Partition.” Although recognizing the “problematic aspects” of the “fetishized” way in which Beyoncé is presented (or indeed presents herself), Hansen concludes that its “playfulness” makes the performance “potentially subversive” (177). However, while the Madonna debate predominantly focused on the contested possibility of female agency through objectification and commodification, discussions about Beyoncé’s star image cannot discount the specific discourses of the stereotyping and exploitation of black female bodies within mainstream popular culture. As a black diva, Beyoncé must both negotiate the commodification-empowerment divide along gender lines, as was the case with Madonna, and also along racial lines, moving between a position of the politics of respectability on the one hand, which prescribes the “acceptable” way black women are to present themselves in public, and a position of sexually provocativeness, yet without reinforcing persistent stereotypes of the sexually unrestrained black woman, on the other. In her discussion of the Beyoncé star image, Anne Mitchell recognizes that the performance of a sexually empowered black woman can “easily fall into stereotypical depictions” (53), but argues that Beyoncé’s star persona succeeds in challenging racial and gendered stereotypes by being “an aggressive high femme, a person who elevates femininity to the level of theatrical performance, [and] who consciously constructs themselves as a feminine being” (41). This tension between respectability and sexually provocativeness is also visible in the “Diva” music video, as the dictionary-style lemma of the opening shot presents two definitions of the “respectable” diva that subsequently are challenged by Beyoncé’s “aggressive femme” performance. By using the Sasha Fierce alter ego, Beyoncé “comfortably occupies both spaces,” as Farah Jasmin Griffin notes; unlike the black divas who came before her, Beyoncé “has not been forced to choose between ‘respectable lady’ [like Diana Ross] and ‘bombshell’ [like Tina Turner]” (138). Similarly, Aisha Durham has pointed out that Beyoncé is “both girl gang member and glamorous Diana-esque diva” (43). However, as both scholars agree, although Beyoncé might experience her use of an alter ego as empowering, the fact that she still needed to explicitly separate these two sides of her star image reveals how these different

definitions of the diva continue to categorize and curtail black female sexuality and its political potential.

One can argue that, in case of Beyoncé's star image, such a categorization was never really challenged until her 2016 Super Bowl performance of "Formation" and the release of her 2016 audiovisual album *Lemonade*, both received by critics and fans as an "unapologetically black" turn in her work. As Inna Arzumanova has argued, "Formation" and *Lemonade* are "closed-source," meaning that for white audiences their specific black content is more difficult to access and thus less easily appropriated. In stark contrast, Beyoncé's earlier work (including "Diva" and the *I Am... Sasha Fierce* album) has been "open-source," made according to logic of the white-dominated entertainment industry, in which black female artists need "to invoke an otherness, and to then – urgently – make that otherness palatable, legible, and, of course, commercially portable" (422). This is reminiscent of Nicole Fleetwood's prior arguments regarding Diana Ross, who needed "to incorporate certain racial markers of difference into her image and persona" (57), yet without alienating or threatening her white mainstream audience. With "Diva" and the *Sasha Fierce* alter ego, Beyoncé could redefine and cross the boundaries of the black diva much easier than her predecessors Tina Turner and Ross ever could. However, the concept of the black diva in itself remains "open-source" and continues to shape Beyoncé's star image according to the logic of the entertainment industry, including the easily made assumption that Beyoncé – like the divas who came before her – is a gay icon. While her diva performance may be empowering to her gay male fans (as will be discussed below), such an assumed role also perceives Beyoncé's star image within a pre-existing narrative of the black diva as a source of inspiration in gay male diva worship.

## Camping the Diva

The cover of the July 2013 issue of *Flaunt* magazine features a nude portrait of Beyoncé with glamorous makeup on her face, her hair pulled back, and colorful glitter sprinkled all over her body. Shot two years earlier by Tony Duran, the photo presents the pop star in a classic diva pose, looking directly at the camera with a rather aloof gaze and unsmiling, slightly parted lips. The cover has no written text, except the magazine's title faded in the background and one word in white letters upfront: "BEYONCÉ." Inside the magazine, a short interview with Beyoncé includes a question about her gay male following:

*Flaunt:* Gay men are drawn to you and empowered by you, as they have been to "gay icons" Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Cher, and Madonna. What is it about you, and those women, that gay men love?

*Beyoncé:* I'm flattered if I'm in the company of those great women. I think they love that we are bold, unafraid to love, and flaunt our sexuality and strength. ("Beyoncé: Under the Gilded Banner")

One year later, Beyoncé is featured on the cover of *OUT* magazine (May 2014), again nude, but this time in a black-and-white photo by Santiago & Mauricio, posing as Marilyn Monroe, with platinum blond short hair, head tilted back, closed eyes, and slightly open mouth. Similar to *Flaunt*, the cover has no written text except two words

in bright pink letters: “OUT” and “POWER.” Although the magazine does not mention specific gay icons, Beyoncé is asked about being an inspiration to “the LGBT community,” to which she answers: “I’m very happy if my words can ever inspire or empower someone who considers themselves an oppressed minority” (qtd. in [Hicklin](#)). What stands out is not only that both magazines uncritically assume that Beyoncé is a source of gay male empowerment, but also that she is placed within a tradition of gay diva worship that apparently is fixated on white stars: Marilyn, Judy, Barbra, Cher, Madonna, yet no Lena, Diana, Aretha, Tina, Donna, Whitney, or Janet.

I cannot help but notice some reluctance in the above responses by Beyoncé to these questions about being a gay icon. Compared to her fellow pop divas, most notably Madonna and Lady Gaga, gay diva worship plays a far less prominent role in Beyoncé’s star image, both in her publicity as well as in the academic literature. While recent studies of Lady Gaga pay explicit attention to her gay male fan base ([Deflem](#); [Jennex](#)), most scholars writing about Beyoncé as a potential source of empowerment focus on feminism and, more specifically, on black feminism, topics that Beyoncé actively has addressed in her performances and public statements ([Durham](#); [Kohlman](#); [Trier-Bieniek](#); [Weidhase](#)). A notable exception is [Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis](#), who argues that Beyoncé’s “corpus of feminist discourse and racial politics often co-exist with a camp sensibility that invites queer readings,” yet he also sees Beyoncé’s status as gay icon as a form of “meta-camping,” based on “a network of codes and practices that appear to be long-established within the cultural exchange of gay men with pop divas” (408). Such meta-camping becomes apparent in a 2011 interview with Beyoncé for *ProudSource*. Introduced by the interviewer as “the reigning diva – she’s called Queen Bey for a reason, people,” Beyoncé names Diana Ross and Cher as examples of glamor, explains that she knows gay culture through her stylists and makeup artist as well as drag queens who want to look like Sasha Fierce, and repeats clichés about self-empowerment: “If anyone is brave and true to themselves, it’s my gay fans. The amount of confidence and fearlessness it takes to do what maybe is not what your parents expect you to do or what society may think is different – to be brave and be different and to be yourself – is just so beautiful” (qtd. in [Azzopardi](#)).

The answer to *Flaunt*’s question, “What is it about [Beyoncé] that gay men love?” lies thus not so much in the specific qualities of Beyoncé’s star image but rather in the tradition of gay diva worship to which she belongs – or more accurately, in which she is placed, including by me as I write this article. As [Alex Doty](#) has argued, the diva can inspire not only gay men but also “women, [other] queer men, blacks, Latinos, and other marginalized groups,” showing them by her sheer example “the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live in a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and to try and live that life on your own terms” (2). By publicly reveling in her success, the diva provides living proof that through self-determination the obstacles in society can be overcome. Moreover, the diva performance presents an alternative world of camp glamor and excess, an escapist fantasy that celebrates theatricality and artificiality – similar to the musical and disco music, which both tend to be considered typically “gay” genres and often feature divas in the starring role. As [Brett Farmer](#) points out, “[T]he diva is a figure that is ‘fabulous’ in both senses of the term, as ‘marvelous and astonishing’ but also ‘fable-like, fictitious, and invented’ and, in her fabulousness, the diva extends to her [gay] devotees untold possibilities for

the production of equally fabulous modes of empowered selfhood” (189). Much of the diva’s appeal is based on the attitude of self-worth that she expresses and the promise that such an attitude beholds.

Although the gay magazines quoted above compare Beyoncé to white stars, her two black diva predecessors, Tina Turner and Diana Ross, also have been perceived as gay icons. In his essay “Tina Theory,” [Madison Moore](#) uses his own experience to discuss how a young black gay man could become empowered by Turner’s “embodiment of ‘fierceness’ as ... a spectacular way of being in the world – a transgressive over-performance of the self through aesthetics” (71–72). [Daphne Brooks](#) has recognized the voice of Diana Ross as a source of inspirational escapism, “its own kind of powerful statement of extremes, a queer gateway and an invitation to ... never stop imagining that we might travel to other places – kinder, gentler, freer” (206–07). While noting the importance of Ross’s gay male fans, [Nicole Fleetwood](#) suggests that “Ross’s practice of queer iconicity goes beyond fandom and connects to an affective performance of sensuality, recognition and love,” meaning “an affinity, an aesthetic, a sexual exploitation, and notion of belonging that Ross engaged, moving her far beyond the heterosexual romantic sensibility of her earlier career [with the Supremes]” (65). When in the late 1990s Ross’s mainstream success had dwindled, record company Motown used her status as gay icon to market her as “the original diva.” The 1996 music video of her cover of Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco classic “I Will Survive” recreates a West Hollywood gay parade – the “Night of 1,000 Dianas” – with the participation of real-life organizations such as the Gay Asian Pacific Support Network, the West Hollywood Cheerleaders, and the Dykes on Bikes, and featuring RuPaul and four drag queens looking more like the iconic diva “Diana Ross” than Ross does herself. At the time, Ross stated that the song was a tribute to her gay fans, “my way of saying thanks for their loyalty,” adding “it isn’t just about being gay, it’s being allowed to live your life” (qtd. in [Davis](#) 69). While used as an obvious marketing tool, thereby commodifying the tradition of gay male diva worship, the black diva’s queer iconicity still functions as a source of individual and collective empowerment.

How Beyoncé is worshiped as a gay icon is explored in the documentary *Waiting for B*. Shot during the summer of 2013, the documentary follows a group of Brazilian Beyoncé fans – mostly self-identified gay men of color and a few women – literally camping outside of the Morumbi football stadium in São Paulo for two months, ensuring that they will be in front of the stage when Beyoncé performs there as part of her *The Mrs. Carter Show World Tour*. The male fans address each other as “B” (short for “bicha” meaning “queer”), a common practice among Brazilian gay men, which also explains the “B.” rather than “Bey” in the film’s title. The documentary presents the fans as being marginalized within mainstream society, not only because of their sexual identities, but also because of their lack of financial means – the film starts with the written text: “For early entry to Beyoncé’s São Paulo show, you could pay around US\$700... or arrive earlier and wait in line.” For two months, the group functions as a close-knit fan community, providing emotional support but also exercising strict social control – absence from the line is only allowed to go to work or with a doctor’s note. The documentary is made in observational mode; the film makers are never seen or heard, while the camera follows the fans on the pavement in front of the stadium, inside their tents, and, a few times, at their work or during a quick stop at their

homes to pick up clean clothes. Exceptions are the testimonial interviews with individual fans, giving a personal backstory to their fandom.

Ten minutes into the documentary, when the fans talk inside one of the tents, the obvious question, “Why are all Beyoncé fans gay?” is raised, but never explicitly answered: “Ay, honey, a straight guy camping to see Beyoncé?” and “Beyoncé’s hetero fans will be in the bleachers; the front stage is all fags, all homosexuals” (all quoted dialogue is taken from the film’s subtitles). Instead the conversation shifts to a discussion of racism and homophobia that the fans have experienced in mainstream society as well as in gay subcultures, in which Beyoncé is used not so much as an inspiration but rather as a shared point of reference. One fan claims that Beyoncé “wants to be white,” to which another responds, “It’s not about wanting to be white; it’s to show that any black woman can be as beautiful blond as any white woman.” In this way, her fans do not just uncritically adore Beyoncé; her preferences, looks, and behavior are heavily debated, enabling them to discuss the possibilities and limitations of their own lives in relation to the utopian perspective that Beyoncé’s star image provides. That Beyoncé does function as a source of empowerment becomes clear in the testimonial interviews with individual fans. For example, fan Bruno tells about secretly dancing to Beyoncé before he came out to himself and to his parents: “I closed all the doors, put on her music, and started to dance, dub, choreograph, and it was actually a form of accepting myself. Because coming out as gay is a really difficult phase, that’s why I can say Beyoncé played a really big role in my life.”

As the documentary shows, performing Beyoncé is even more important to her gay fans than discussing her lifestyle. The fans use the pavement in front of the stadium as a fashion runway, striking dramatic diva poses and practicing choreographies. They exclaim, “I am fabulous” in English, ignoring the stares and sometimes verbal abuse of people passing by in the street. Only when, one week before the concert, the stadium ground is taking over by football fans, the gay fans again become invisible. The contrast between the aggressive masculine behavior of the football fans and the playful campiness of the gay fans is striking, a grim reminder that beyond the relatively safe space of their fan community, there is little room for expressing queer identity. Perhaps surprisingly, the documentary does not highlight specific Brazilian cultural attitudes toward masculinity and homosexuality, but instead presents its stories of gay male fan empowerment within the tradition of gay diva worship as discussed by Alex Doty and Brett Farmer, in which the diva is a powerful source of inspiration for those who are marginalized. While providing an insightful example of gay male diva worship, *Waiting for B.* seems to reinforce rather than to expand the conventional narrative of the diva as a gay icon. Although Beyoncé is physically absent (the documentary does not include footage from the actual concert, but only the fans responding afterwards), her star image is present throughout, evoked continuously by the debates and performances by her gay fans. As such, *Waiting for B.* is not about Beyoncé, but about how her star image provides her gay fans with a collective sense of belonging as well as a shared space – albeit temporary – where they can express their queer identities out in the open and with an unapologetic diva attitude.

## Conclusion: Give It Up for the Queen

When introducing Tina Turner at the 2008 Grammy Awards, Beyoncé performs a one-minute theatrical number that pays tribute to her black diva predecessors. Dressed in



golden hotpants and a sequined top, Beyoncé speaks the following words, accompanied by a jazzy soundtrack:

Sarah Vaughan, Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan. Historical women who have performed on this very stage. When I was a little girl, I dreamed of being on this stage, but I knew I needed all the right elements. Like the beat of Donna Summer, the spirit of Mahalia Jackson, the jazz of Ella or Nancy. . . . Lena Horne, Anita Baker, Diana Ross. Gladys, Janet, and the beautiful melodies of Whitney. The legacy [sic] they have bestowed are simply irreplaceable. But there is one legend who has the essence of all of these things. The glamour, the soul, the passion, the strength, the talent. Ladies and gentlemen, stand on your feet and give it up for the queen. (qtd. in [Van Buskirk](#)).

The tribute caused some diva drama in the tabloid press after Aretha Franklin, who had been present in the audience, publicly complained that she felt snubbed by Beyoncé and that not Turner but she was “the queen” ([Van Buskirk](#); [Pointer](#) 152). Franklin’s response not only enabled the press to highlight the clichéd difficult behavior of black divas, but also missed the significance of the performance. Beyoncé may have been introducing Tina Turner, but her performance is most of all a showcase of her own talents, suggesting that, rather than the “new Tina,” “new Diana,” or “new Aretha,” Beyoncé is in fact an accumulation of all the black divas who came before her. By paying tribute to her famous predecessors, Beyoncé becomes part of the legacy that these black divas represent.

Later that year, Beyoncé performed another diva tribute, singing “The Way We Were” to honor Barbra Streisand at the 2008 Kennedy Center Honors event. The difference between the two performances is remarkable. While her tribute at the Grammy Awards is a typical “aggressive femme” Beyoncé performance, her tribute to Streisand is far more subdued and within the tradition of respectability. Standing against a dark backdrop in a circle of white light with smoke circling around her, Beyoncé wears a black evening gown and has her hair pinned-up, imitating Streisand’s trademark look. At the end of the song, Beyoncé looks up to the balcony where Streisand is seated, stating: “It’s an honor to sing for you, Miss Streisand.” Although, back in 1982, [Richard Dyer](#) wrote that Diana Ross “is the only female black star whose name can be mentioned in the same breath as Frank Sinatra or Barbra Streisand” (36), legend has it that, throughout her career, Ross was “obsessed” by Streisand and the success she embodied. As her fellow Motown artist Marvin Gaye explained: “If she had been white like Streisand, it would have been a hundred times easier for her” (qtd. in [Taraborrelli](#) 191). Whether or not Ross’s obsession was real, the persistent rumor in itself shows the relevance of race, suggesting that for black divas the status of Streisand was considered out of reach. With her tributes to both the black divas as well as Barbra Streisand, Beyoncé not only brings these two strands of the diva legacy together, but also shows that the racially defined categories of the entertainment industry can be defied.

From the very beginning of her career, Beyoncé has been perceived as a diva, both positively as part of the tradition of legendary black female performers, as well as negatively, assuming that her success would be based on unscrupulous excess at the expense of others – the *Dreamgirls* narrative. Her acknowledgment of her predecessors through performances on stage and on screen has paid tribute to the black divas who came before her, thereby not only recognizing their talent and cultural relevance, but



also strengthening the Beyoncé star image as a serious and significant entertainer. Moreover, these performances placed the conventional image of the black diva in the past, enabling Beyoncé to redefine the diva on her own terms, denounced by some as just another profitable incarnation of the Beyoncé brand, while others have recognized its critical potential in debates about race and gender. A similar tension can be noted in the perception of Beyoncé as an icon of gay male diva worship. On the one hand, the uncritical assumption by the entertainment industry that Beyoncé is a gay icon tends to turn the diva into a caricature, yet, on the other, as the gay fans portrayed in the documentary *Waiting for B.* show, Beyoncé actually can function as a source of empowerment. More than a decade after Diana Ross taught her the diva master class at the BET Awards, the image of the black diva as fierce and fabulous remains an intrinsic part of Beyoncé's global superstardom.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

*Jaap Kooijman* is associate professor in Media Studies and American Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the author of *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture* (AUP 2013). His articles on black superstardom—Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Whitney Houston, and Beyoncé—have been published in journals such as *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Celebrity Studies*, and *[in]Transition*, as well as edited book collections such as *Popular Music and Film* (Wallflower 2003), *Performance and Popular Music* (Ashgate 2006), and *Revisiting Star Studies* (Edinburgh UP 2017).

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