RADIANT DIVAS:
IN PURSUIT OF THE QUEER SUBLIME

BY

JOHN MUSSER

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Richard T. Rodriguez, Chair
Associate Professor Martin F. Manalansan IV
Assistant Professor Sandra Ruiz
Professor Francesca Royster

ABSTRACT

Radiant Divas: In Pursuit of the Queer Sublime considers the importance of the figure of the diva within a queer cultural imaginary in the long twentieth century. Divas, through a performance of the sublime, productively stretch the boundaries of queerness and race into new directions. I argue that divas stage the ontological connections between queerness and race, and that they reveal the spectacular ways both queerness and race are presented and preserved, in the body of the diva and the body politic that adores and identifies with them. This project is methodologically interdisciplinary, and I draw from literary studies, performance studies, aesthetic philosophy, queer theory, and critical race theory. I use this sundry method because the diva's own body is constructed intertextually, mediated by print, stage, and screen. I have curated a genealogy of divas, focusing on four specific performers across the twentieth and twenty-first century—'Ma' Rainey, Grace Jones, Kylie Minogue, and Nomi Ruiz. Each of these performers help me to shape the history of queerness and race in the twentieth and twenty first century. And in contextualizing each of these performers within their cultural and historical moments of eruption, I can show how divas index the affects and disparate formations of queerness and race within the changing urban landscapes of the United States across the long twentieth century.

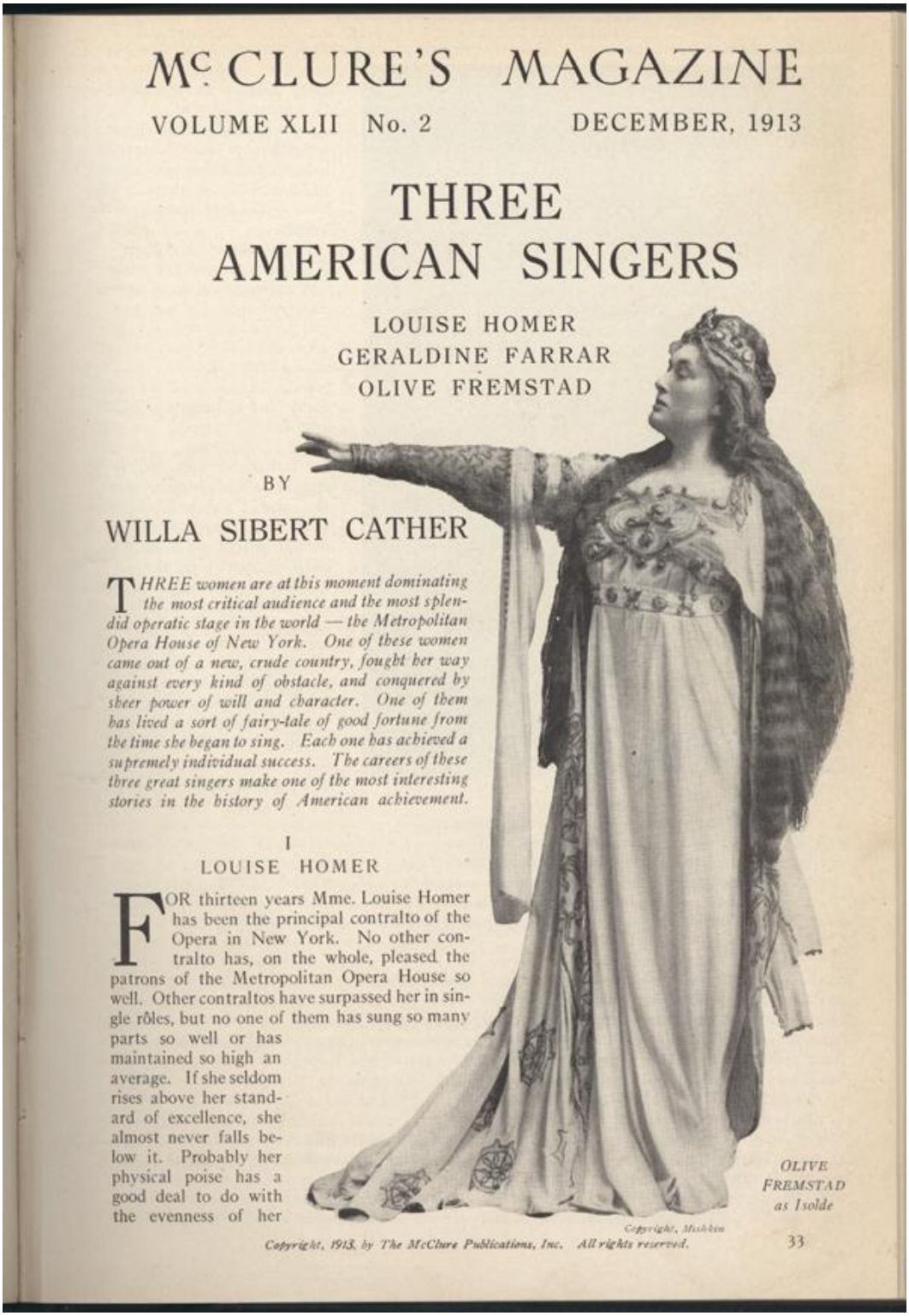
In this dissertation, drawing from the aesthetic philosophies of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, and Jean-François Lyotard, I contend that the sublime is always queer, and always racialized. These aesthetic philosophers, in speaking of the formless, disruptive power of the sublime, reveal its queer properties. While at the same time, Kant's and Burke's treatises on the sublime always function through the construction of a racial index or hierarchy. Thus, through

the sublime, the diva always tells us something about queerness and race. And furthermore, in the performance of the sublime, the diva performs a kind of queer unmooring of the categories of race and sexuality more broadly, even as it seems to rely on the expansion and augmentation of those categories to derive its force and power. The diva choreographs and augments her gender, sexuality, or race on stage. And the sublime is the moment where the diva and her audience meet; the moment when an ontological impossibility—the racial and/or queer body—sensorially touches an audience. To a queer audience, the diva becomes the icon who is both 'like me,' and productively 'not like me,' stretching the boundaries of the body now and creating affinities and possibilities for the body in the future. The relationship between a queer audience and the diva on stage reveals to us an aspect of queerness that is always mobile, always in pursuit of something spectacular and beyond itself.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"It could have been Barbra, Janis Joplin, or Beyoncé that hooked me.
But in the end, whom we choose as our divas may be less important than what they come to do for us, generation after generation, and often without even knowing it."[1]
–Michael Montlack, *My Diva*

[1] Michael Montlack, "Stevie Nicks: 'And Wouldn't You Love to Love Her?'" in *My Diva: 65 Gay Men On The Women Who Inspire Them*, ed. Michael Montlack (Madison:Terrace Books, 2009), 201-202.



McCLURE'S MAGAZINE

VOLUME XLII No. 2 DECEMBER, 1913

THREE AMERICAN SINGERS

LOUISE HOMER
GERALDINE FARRAR
OLIVE FREMSTAD

BY

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

THREE women are at this moment dominating the most critical audience and the most splendid operatic stage in the world — the Metropolitan Opera House of New York. One of these women came out of a new, crude country, fought her way against every kind of obstacle, and conquered by sheer power of will and character. One of them has lived a sort of fairy-tale of good fortune from the time she began to sing. Each one has achieved a supremely individual success. The careers of these three great singers make one of the most interesting stories in the history of American achievement.

I
LOUISE HOMER

FOR thirteen years Mme. Louise Homer has been the principal contralto of the Opera in New York. No other contralto has, on the whole, pleased the patrons of the Metropolitan Opera House so well. Other contraltos have surpassed her in single rôles, but no one of them has sung so many parts so well or has maintained so high an average. If she seldom rises above her standard of excellence, she almost never falls below it. Probably her physical poise has a good deal to do with the evenness of her

OLIVE FREMSTAD as Isolde

Copyright, Mishkin

33

Figure 1 - Olive Fremstad as Isolde, from Richard Wagner's Tristan & Isolde. Depicted in McClure's Magazine, in "Three American Singers," written by Willa Cather, 1913.

Introduction:
A Diva's Entrance

"But the pursuit of them is one of the most glorious forms of human activity."[2] *- "Three American Singers," Willa Cather*

Diva worship is never solely an act of adoration; rather, it is often a queer and powerful act of becoming. Look at the famed early-twentieth-century soprano on the preceding page, Olive Fremstad. She commands the first page of the article which provides the epigraph to this chapter (see figure 1). Fremstad stands tall, imperiously beckoning, reaching with her outstretched arm. Who can resist when the diva beckons to you? In publishing "Three American Singers" during her tenure at McClure's Magazine, Cather's enthusiasm and adoration of Fremstad caused her to devote half of the article to profiling the great soprano. Cather closes this article with the above epigraph, putting into words the nature of the 'glorious' relationship that most of us have with the divas who inspire us: one of pursuit. This dissertation thus focuses on the aesthetics of this very relationship that divas form with those who pursue them.

As for me, my Catholic upbringing may have taught me that guardian angels would guide me and protect me along life's winding path, but as I reflect I instead find that divas have consistently been the figures (perhaps no less sacred than angels) guiding me into gayness and more and more into the weirder sides of queer life. Queerness is the open space of affect or embodiment where one's own body might be read, structured, or act in excess or shortcoming of its expected comportments.[3] Queerness emerges through the knowledge or feeling that one's

[2] Willa Cather, "Three American Singers," *McClure's Magazine*, December 1913, 42.

[3] This draws from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's own definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

desires or body is different, and sometimes, as I'm claiming, divas help to facilitate that knowledge or feeling of difference. Divas feel queer because they model on stage what we might be, and they produce a sensorial and affective space where we momentarily come into contact with a potentially terrifying but ecstatic form of queer embodiment.

My first foray into diva worship was not a love of Britney Spears or Lady Gaga, it was instead a love for the peculiar almost-teen pop of Australian singer, Kylie Minogue. Her voice, her sound, and her image was *almost* like her American contemporaries, but not quite right, too campy and gleeful, a queer outlier among a throng of early 2000s neo-teenyboppers. In watching her music video to "Love at First Sight" as a teen, I was instantly drawn to the peculiarly adorned and colorful dancers, their mechanistic choreography, as well as being drawn to my newfound diva Kylie's awkward entrance in the video—where she almost stumbles down a geometric animated staircase. Her strangeness did not detract from her appeal, and as she sang about her lover making everything go from 'wrong to right,' I too felt that Kylie had opened up a more optimistic way of understanding my own queer self. I related to that feeling of being a queer outlier as a gay teenager growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Enthusiastically listening to Kylie Minogue could be considered a banal or everyday act, but it left a spectacular impact upon my young self—I identified with a quirky campiness that always signaled queerness and fabulosity.[4] Connecting with Kylie Minogue helped me to navigate a world that did not always love or encourage my sissyness or just plain strangeness. Learning that other gay or queer folk also liked Kylie, even if I didn't know who they were, connected me to a way of doing and being in the world that made me just a little bit bolder in my performance of self. The femininity

[4] Madison Moore, in *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, gestures towards the relationship between divas, queerness, and their larger argument about fabulous ways of living. He mentions someone's adage for fabulous living as "I wake up every day and think, 'What would Diana Ross and Grace Jones do?'" See Madison Moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 7.

performed through the diva often gives queer men like myself an 'in' into configuring their own femininity into their queer bodies, often producing delightful interpretations of sissydom and faggotry. Though gay or queer men certainly don't own the phenomenon of diva worship, the relationship divas have with a gay/queer audience more broadly helps to explain my stakes and investment in writing a monograph about divas and their sublime effect on queerness.

Just a few years later, while in my late teens/early twenties, I began performing as a drag queen, which by design moved me closer to divas. In preparing for drag performances, I learned to mimic diva gestures, their catch phrases, snarls of the lip, and improbable hairdos. My drag practice and my fondness for divas are caught in a symbiotic loop of love. I mention my drag practice because it reveals the extent to which divas can pull people into new understandings of embodiment and queerness—it certainly did for me. The diva is a sublime figure who has a gravitational pull that yoked not only me, but many other queers, into her orbit. This dissertation therefore aspires to break open and create a narrative to this process, to trace out the aesthetic source of their power, and to explore the mechanism through which divas exert a performative force upon queerness. Divas perform the ecstatic, frenzied, and chaotic affects of queerness, fostering a sensory investment—audiences enraptured in a feeling of pursuit for divas that defies disaffection in an era of flattening affect.[5] Feminine figures have been performing on and off stage as performance cultures developed across the world, but the *diva* is a uniquely modern figure. *Radiant Divas: In Pursuit of the Queer Sublime* argues that divas, as I understand them, have always been powerful and performative eruptions of femininity, but from the early twentieth century onward, they are always situated as queer and always tell us something about

[5] See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

race, as well. I want to state plainly and clearly that the figure of the diva has consistently been one of modernity's most enduring, endearing, and powerful performative phenomena, one that sculpts and mutually influences the direction and production of queer bodies and feelings.

Queer Provocations – Harmonizing with Queerness

Divas are queer not just because they have historically gathered an audience of queer people who follow them. Divas are queer because they create the conditions for queerness itself. For instance, the title of Cyndi Lauper's 1983 debut album, *She's So Unusual*, is more than a catchy title; it actually reveals how we expect our divas to be strange, or queer. There is something in the personal history of the diva, in her gesture, in her stage presence, in her training, that always marks her as somewhat unusual. So, what makes a diva? How have past divas remained in the cultural imaginary? Why do so many of us remember the wild stories of Grace Jones dancing at Studio 54 during the height of the disco era, but have a foggier memory of Melanie Safka?[6] Divas seem to have *IT*, that magnetic *je ne sais quoi* which grabs—and holds—one's attention. Joseph Roach meditates upon this It in his appropriately titled *It*, explaining that

> Performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else, filling our field of vision with the flesh-and-blood matter of what can only be imagined to exist. But with an intensity of focus beyond the reach of normal people, those with It can project these and other antimonies apparently at will."[7]

[6] On the surface, Melanie Safka was a much more successful recording artist, with more consistent charting songs and albums. Yet the enduring curious appeal of Grace Jones suggests that the diva leaves a legacy that is intimately tied up with queerness. Record sales and popularity, by themselves, tell us very little about divas and what we imagine their legacy or afterlife to be. Conversely, divas who tend to move fewer records often have a position of influence at the margins of culture.

[7] Joseph R. Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 9.

The diva provokes, calls an audience into action, identification, and recognition with their own bodies and the bodies of those around them. Extending Roach's initial claim here, it seems that divas might have a rather specific kind of "It," which gathers the focus, attention, and inspiration of queer subjects more than those who adhere to the norm. And the afterlife of diva performance suffuses into cultural memory, where, years later, even after the diva's 'prime,' she is remembered and inspires change. The investigation into diva afterlives and their 'retroactivation' in cultural memory is taken up by Jeanne Scheper in *Moving Performances*: *Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage*. Scheper explains that "despite this uneven archive and the differing legibility of their contributions, the varying ways that their repertoires persist… indicate not just how an individual figure (a diva, a star) is remembered but also the myriad ways that the practices of performance, reception, and remembering compose the iconicity of the modern diva."[8] In this way, part of the reason why some divas persist in the cultural imaginary is because audiences (queer audiences, as most germane to my analysis) still look to them as the aesthetic and performative forces that further inspire the performative, repetitive, and ritualistic gestures that we might call self-making or subject formation. The images or anecdotes about Grace Jones looking stern or roaring at Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Conan the Destroyer* still circulate on social networks as quick models to queer folk of what fierce, stoic power looks like, or as an emblem of a stylized, avant-garde, queer body. Madison Moore, in his insightful treatise on "Tina Theory," states that "Everything I know about being queer I learned from Tina Turner." Indeed, Moore explains that the relationship he formed with images and performances of Turner is what allowed him to "touch queerness."[9] Even if a young Moore never met or saw Turner

[8] Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, And Remembering The Modern Stage* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 21.
[9] Madison Moore, "Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012): 71.

perform on stage, there was still a "spectacular presence" that he felt guiding him from the TV set or the radio, into a bodily knowledge of queerness, blackness, and a 'fierceness' that could be read as sublime aesthetic excess.[10]

While Moore's insights are perhaps some of the most recent in an academic consideration of divas, the most well-known full-length treatment of the diva begins with the publication of Wayne Koestenbaum's groundbreaking *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*.[11] Koestenbaum's work is foundational to my project because of the way he likewise tethers divas and queerness together, while gesturing towards the sublime (or perhaps taking it as a given). To Koestenbaum, "Diva is a specific female role (a woman opera singer of great fame and brilliance), but it is also a pliant social institution, a framework for emotion, a kind of conduct, expectation, or desire, that can move through a body that has nothing to do with opera, that can flush the cheeks of a nonsinging, nonperforming body."[12] I consign Koestenbaum's definition here in thinking about a diva as a woman of exceptional talent,[13] and as a complex series of social, affective, and haptic relations that move through a queer constituency. José Esteban Muñoz, in his reading of *The Queen's Throat*, explains that the love of opera divas by gay men in the early and mid-twentieth century offered an unexpected "identity-consolidating hub," and that this "disidentification with the opera diva does not erase the fiery females that fuel his identity-making machinery; rather, it lovingly retains their lost

[10] Ibid, 72; 80.
[11] In other recent sustained scholarship on divas, *Camera Obscura* published a special double-issue devoted to diva performance in (mostly) film and media, edited by Alexander Doty.
[12] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, And the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 111.
[13] I would be remiss if I didn't include a caveat to Koestenbaum's definition, which perhaps assumes a solidity or recognizability of 'woman' or 'female role.' I believe, rather, that the diva has less to do with being female or being a woman, and is instead connected to a queer performance of femininity, which may or may not be performed by a woman. This caveat allows us to read performers like Prince, Freddie Mercury, or Klaus Nomi as divas as well; they produce similar queer effects and aspire to an otherworldly sublime in a similar way to the other performers in my archive.

presence through imitation, repetition, and admiration."[14] Thus to Muñoz, diva worship is not a destructive consumption of femininity, but rather a process that engenders performative possibilities for embodiment. However, I must further amend both Koestenbaum and Muñoz here, and expand this zone of disidentification and sensorial embodiment beyond the realm of opera. I find it crucial in this dissertation to update the definition of diva to include performers who sing outside of the jurisdiction of opera, and to include divas who rose to importance through popular or avant-garde sounds, as opposed to classical ones. Pope and Leonardi draw our attention to an unevenness in the scholarly and literary attention paid to divas, acknowledging that "despite the existence of African-American opera singers, the 'opera diva' as a cultural icon is consistently constructed as white."[15] Thus, what my insistence in moving beyond opera allows me to do in this project is to better attend to the politics and aesthetics of race inherent in the figure of the diva.[16]

Even though Koestenbaum contains his discussion in *The Queen's Throat* specifically to the operatic diva, his vision for how divas connect to queerness more broadly is astute. Koestenbaum claims that the 'voice' of the diva is the sensorial conduit that connects her to a queer audience. Beautifully outlining this process, he says that

> A singer's voice sets up vibrations and resonances in the listener's body. First, there are the physiological sensations we call 'hearing.' Second, there are gestures of response with which the listener mimics the singer, expresses physical sympathy, appreciation, or

[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
[15] Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 17.
[16] As Pope and Leonardi gesture towards the gospel, blues, or jazz singers written into African American fiction by authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, or Terry McMillan, they stop short at incorporating these figures into their project, instead stating "we hope that someone will give this tradition the scholarly attention is deserves." While this dissertation is not a project about gospel, the blues, or jazz, one of my goals for this scholarly project is to use diverse musical forms and the divas they produce as a way to think about race and queerness in tandem. While I admire Pope and Leonardi's approach and rigor, their commitment to opera prevented them from having a meaningful conversation about race that powerfully informs the figure of the diva in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See Pope and Leonardi, 17.

> exaltation... Third, the singer has presence, an expressive relation to her body—and presence is contagious. I catch it. The dance of sound waves on the tympanum, and the sigh I exhale in sympathy with the singer, persuade me that I have a body—if only by analogy, if only a second-best copy of the singer's body. I'm a lemming, imprinted by the soprano, my existence an aftereffect of her crescendo. Straight socialization makes queer people discard their bodies; listening restores queer embodiment, if only for the duration of a phrase. Forceful displays of singing insist that the diva has a body and so do you because your heartbeat shifts in uncanny affinity with her ascent.[17]

Here Koestenbaum explains part of the reason why queer audiences thirst for divas—in their voice lies the key, the possibility of inhabiting a queer body and living queerly. He draws our attention to the fact that listening to the diva is a sensorial act that places us in our body, which can be precarious terrain for queers. And he also points out that sound is *haptic*; you don't merely hear sounds, you *feel* them vibrating in you and through you, and you choreograph your own body in response, mapping out the terrain of queerness in the space of listening and in the space of the body. That divas are inherently sonic figures, creating music, augmenting the body with the voice, is not insignificant. The musicality of divas not only expands the textual breadth through which divas live, but it helps us to understand their reach across space. To best showcase this textual breadth of diva performance across space and time in this project, I discuss divas of opera, blues, disco, bubble-gum pop, and indie electro-pop to index certain aesthetically and culturally important moments in diva performance throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The divas in each of these musical genres have a similar queer trajectory whereby they are able to gather queer subjects in space. I take seriously Josh Kun's claim that "Music is, after all, a spatial practice, evoking, transcending, and organizing places along spatial trajectories."[18] Space is demarcated and made meaningful by divas. Where they perform, where they are heard, or where you first heard the diva—these become memorandums of queerness.

---

[17] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 42.

[18] Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, And America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 16.

The boundaries set by the voice of the diva creates the spaces where queerness can thrive. Queerness after all, is also a kind of proximity, as understood by Sara Ahmed, a 'besideness' to not only norms of embodiment or sexuality, but a 'besideness' to other queer bodies, a 'touch' that helps to constitute a felt sense of queerness.[19] Muñoz likewise theorizes queerness spatially and temporally, where it is constantly deferred to the horizon that is not only not *here*, but not *now*, it is in the future, where we catch glimpses and feel its ecstatic pull through brief moments in performance and aesthetic practice.[20] Divas therefore always have an afterlife that extends beyond the performance or the simple act of listening. Divas always offer up an embodied possibility that we *may* choose to inhabit in the future.

Cather's Case

To illustrate the way that divas offer up this queer possibility of living, I want to consider Willa Cather's classic 1905 short story, "Paul's Case," as an early twentieth-century literary exploration of these questions. Cather is perhaps one of the more famous authors in the early twentieth century who offered literary treatments of divas as reflections of their own passion for the sublime figure of the diva, as the epigraph to this chapter might suggest. Likewise, turning to Cather lets me historicize the diva's relationship to queerness in the expressive cultures of short stories and the novel. That is, divas were not squarely musical figures, they were—and continue to be—important literary figures, as well. In Cather's fiction, we can read the figure of the diva as the crucial player in the answer to questions about how queerness is formed, sensed, and realized. In "Paul's Case," we see the story's famous sissy struggle with heteronormative

[19] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 169.
[20] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-18.

middle-class spaces in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh, before he steals off to New York City with a wad of cash and a chance to build a new life. An often-overlooked episode in the story, though, is when Paul—who has been working as an usher at the Carnegie Music Hall—follows a diva's carriage after a night of performance, so that he might catch a glimpse of the unnamed famed singer. In so doing, Paul does more than just *see* the diva after having *heard* her. Engaging with the diva in such close proximity creates the fantasy for Paul that he might just be like her, immersed in her world. Cather tells the story as such:

> At last the singer came out, accompanied by the conductor who helped her into her carriage and closed the door with a cordial *auf wiedersehen*, which set Paul to wondering whether she were not an old sweetheart of his. Paul followed the carriage over to the hotel, walking so rapidly as not to be far from the entrance when the singer alighted and disappeared behind the swinging glass doors that were opened by a negro in a tall hat and a long coat. In the moment that the door was ajar, it seemed to Paul that he too entered. He seemed to feel himself go after her up the steps, into the warm, lighted building, into an exotic, a tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease. [21]

With 'it seemed to Paul that he too entered,' Cather shows us that Paul's identification with the diva is one where he imagines himself in her body, sharing space and experience. The diva here is also a figure who is pursued. She possesses something that Paul needs, such that Paul needs it to thrive. He seeks her for these reasons. Paul's identification with and adoration of the Diva is the means by which he is able to see, feel, hear, and imagine himself being part of something different, something queer that he feels within himself. Scheper's insights on divas help us to understand exactly why the encounter with the diva is able to provoke such profound action in Paul. She states that "This adoration [of divas] comes from the cultural permission the diva confers on the devotee, a tacitly uncensored permission to inhabit and script his or her own passions."[22] It is through the diva that Paul begins to imagine a new way of existing. He is so

[21] Willa Cather, "Paul's Case." *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 174.
[22] Scheper, *Moving Performances,* 17.

enchanted by this possibility that he steals a vast sum of money and runs away to New York City to experience the luxurious and queer life he feels rightfully entitled to, even if this diva-inspired dream ultimately leads to his death. Here the pursuit of the diva is tantamount to the pursuit of the sublime, where the sublime reaches into the boundless depths of impossible desires or bodies and creates a possibility for how life may be lived queerly. Thus, what I'm claiming is that diva worship, or the pursuit of the sublime through divas, is more than just fandom and adoration; it is rather a social phenomenon of performance that relies on a spectacular figure of femininity and the relationship she has with her audience in order to produce a kind of exuberant queerness felt in the body, through the sublime.

But questions of race always orbit around the diva, as well. In this same passage from "Paul's Case," note how race also emerges at the same moment that the diva suggests queer possibilities to the effete Paul. Just as 'the singer alighted and disappeared behind the swinging glass doors,' the narrator notes that 'a negro in a tall hat and a long coat' had opened the doors for the diva who Paul was watching. Cather is aware of race within the short story, but subsumes it underneath the focalization of the white, queer Paul. Siobhan Somerville reminds us that "The emergence of 'new' sexual identities and the reconfiguration of racialized identities in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries were … ongoing processes of contestation and accumulation."[23] Thus Cather builds up the diva to be a conduit for queerness in Paul, but if we look behind the diva in this story, we see how Cather is placing queerness and race in proximity to each other through the diva. The diva facilitates this encounter between Paul and the 'negro in a tall hat,' even if Cather ultimately separates queerness from the category of race in this story. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, though, divas continue to bring race

[23] Siobhan B Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and The Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 14.

and queerness together, though an evocation of the sublime, despite Cather's attempt to hide, obscure, or separate race from issues of queer embodiment.

Lest it seem that I'm uncritically painting divas as magical beings whose voice and image enchant the world with new ways of being, a closer look at the etymology of diva[24] suggests that divas have consistently held a curious connection to the worlds of the sublime or divine, so perhaps this isn't such a far-fetched conclusion. Divas, through their own vocal and visual stagings, compel frenzied dancing, swooning, stunned silence, ecstasy, penitence, and obedience in their audience. If these sound like religious experiences, this is not an accident. Drawing from Joseph Roach again, divas produce "[t]he It-effect [which] thus often takes on a powerful and sometimes even fearsome religiosity of its own, making everyday experience seem not only strange, but also enchanted."[25] Roach also claims that this persistent enchantment in those who have It and pursue those with It is a challenge to the narrative of *disenchantment* as a key marker of modernity.[26] For queer subjects, something sacred exists in the body, voice, and performance of the diva. Divas evoke the intensity of the sublime, which queer subjects pursue with the fervor of a religious rite. To evoke the sublime on stage brings a great deal of social power (and costs, oftentimes, a great deal of economic power). Yet to discuss the ways that divas evoke or gesture towards the sublime does not undercut or occlude the significant historical circumstances and subcultural communities that in many ways produced the grandeur of divadom as an enduring phenomenon.

[24] Per OED, "< Latin *dīva* goddess…feminine of *dīvus* divine…"
[25] Roach, *It*, 17
[26] Roach, *It*, 16.

Larger than Life: The Sublime

"[T]he sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small."
– Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*[27]

The sublime is the main theoretical paradigm through which I understand divas, and corollary explications of the sublime yield insights into queerness and race, which further inform how I'm understanding divas within this project. While it is tempting to provide a complete and thorough literature review on the sublime, and its circuitous history throughout Western philosophical thought, such a foray is beyond the scope and restraints of this project. Instead, I will explain how the sublime functions as an aesthetic phenomenon primarily through Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, and Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement* (and occasionally through Jean Francois Lyotard's most helpful rearticulations of the sublime vis-a-vis Kant). These Enlightenment accounts of the sublime are invested in defining not only the difference between the beautiful and the sublime, but are also implicitly building a definition of difference itself as defined through the sublime. Burke and Kant define how our aesthetic faculties of comprehending and experiencing the calm, disinterest of the beautiful give one access to subjectivity itself. That is, experiencing aesthetic objects through the disinterested lens of the beautiful allows one to be a fully rational 'human.'

The sublime, on the other hand, is unruly. It is a profound moment of aesthetic or affective overstimulation that feels boundless, defies the expected limits and comportments of form and reason. The categories of what we think a particular form, or body, or experience *should* be are violently redrawn when we encounter the sublime. To Burke, the sublime is an aesthetic experience that is painted through with mostly terror. To him, the vastness of an object

[27] Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Judgement,* translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard. 2nd ed. Revised (London: Macmillan, 1914), 109.

and our mind's struggle to comprehend it is an experience of fright and anxiety. [28] Burke's sublime thus goes beyond the simple delicate balance that beautiful objects bring; it is almost as if the sublime is a trauma to our faculties of perception. Kant's aesthetic project, however, clarifies Burke's meditation, explaining that "The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries. The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought."[29] Kant theorizes that when we encounter the sublime in nature, perhaps a vast starry sky while standing atop a mountain, our powers of imagination cannot properly comprehend an encounter with a vastness that approaches the infinite. That is, an object without form, 'boundlessness…represented.'[30] This way of understanding the sublime as the formless object is useful when applied to divas because diva performance is often theatrical and over-the-top in such a way that the audience reads the diva as transcending the normal forms of the body, becoming, as Kant says, "*that in comparison with which everything else is small."* Even without the production value and stage accoutrements that often aid in this sublime augmentation of the diva, her 'bigness' ultimately boils down to how she carries the room, and how she captivates an audience. This is how a more underground diva like Nomi Ruiz, who does not carry a decades-long career like Kylie Minogue or Grace Jones, nor relies on high production value, is still able to expand and fill the room with her voice and aesthetic presence. The diva is sublime because when she finds her place on stage, she becomes larger than life—everyone and everything else around her seems smaller and insignificant.

[28] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Sublime And Beautiful* (London: Routledge Classics, 2008), 57-58; 71-72; 75.
[29] Kant, *Critique,* 102-103.
[30] Kant, *Critique*, 102-103.

The effects of the sublime are such that Lyotard claims, stating in no uncertain terms, that the sublime is "an ontological sacrilege," that is, doing *being* wrong or incorrectly.[31] An object or experience without form and borders seems to mock the perceived stability of ontological weight. If states or objects of being are supposed to be sensible and rational, with clearly demarcated boundaries, then the sublime commits itself to being irrational or somewhat loopy, reminding us that the boundaries and borders of being are never as stable and knowable as we assume. Part of the sublime's power to evoke awe, pleasure, or terror is because it removes or challenges the boundaries that we assume objects or bodies have. This is the queerness of the sublime. What we have, then, is an object that is still perceived in its entirety, but the form and limits of that object or body are unknown or removed. It appears there is a great deal that is queer about the sublime. Queerness itself has a slippery relationship to form and materiality, and recent conversations about the state of queerness consistently ask queer projects and politics to redraw the norms and systems of naming that bind and categorize.[32] Thus, I propose that we think about the sublime as doing a great deal of *queering*.

The sublime can be queer and can perform queering. Because of this, I think it is useful to think about diva performance as evoking *the queer sublime*. This is not the sublime associated with the experience of seeing the vastness of the world from on top of a mountain, glimpsing the infinite night sky, and the failure of comprehension that comes with it.[33] This is not the idyllic Whitmanian paradise where the queer body immerses itself in nature to experience the sublime.

---

[31] Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on The Analytic of The Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [sections] 23-29* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 189.

[32] See David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?." *Social Text* 23, no. 3/4 (2005): 1-17.

[33] To be fair, Kant moves us away from assumptions that nature itself has anything sublime about it, rather stating that, "Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we can become conscious that we are superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us (so far as it influences us). Everything that excites this feeling in us, e.g. the might of nature which calls forth our forces, is called then (although improperly) sublime." Kant, *Critique*, 129.

This is an altogether different sublime, a sublime that is experienced socially, a sublime of sweat and touching and of underground scenes and loud music and avant-garde outfits and powerful stage presence and high or low notes exquisitely sang—this is the *queer sublime* that is felt through diva performance. The *queer sublime* that divas bring should shake one out of solitude; it is a sensorial immersion in the felt terrain of queerness. Cultural geographer Yi-fu Tuan, in his work on aesthetics and the sensorial, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*: *Aesthetics, Nature, and Cutlure*, understands the sublime as that which has a gravity to it, something simultaneously massive and sacred, which draws us to it. He explains,

> But the sublime, as a type of human experience, is not merely an invention of philosopher artists during a certain historical period. Whenever people step outside the protective enclosure of their known world, they risk encounter with some large, threatening force that yet holds an inexplicable attraction. One can be drawn to the sublime as … one was drawn to the holy, to light, splendor and the numinous—the *mysterium tremendum* that is beyond human rational understanding.[34]

Tuan sees the sublime as something that we pursue, even though it is 'large' and 'threatening, and may challenge the way we have taught ourselves to see and perceive. To some, like Kant or Burke, this experience performs a violence upon the imagination and the rational way in which some have ordered the world, but to others, the sublime glows with recognition and aspiration—it is that which I am similar to, and what which I might become. This is in spite of, or because of, how Tuan claims that the sublime presents itself as divorced from human rationality.

The reason I find the sublime to be a useful theoretical concept, particularly in the service of a minoritized public, is precisely the reason that Kant is suspect of it. As it has been classically defined, the sublime is *rhetorical*, it compels and moves.[35] A sublime experience is powerful

[34] Yi-fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, And Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press for Shearwater Books, 1993), 114.
[35] Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12-17.

because it *moves* us to reconsider or reshape our understandings of how bodies or spaces form themselves. The sublime often moves us to action, which is one of the reasons the Enlightenment thinkers distrusted it so much.[36] Marc Canuel explains part of this Enlightenment-era distrust is because the political dimensions of the sublime are such that they engender a political heterogeneity that erupts, storms, resists, or dissents against the evenness and symmetry that cultural or political norms associated with the beautiful bring about.[37]

To Kant, there is something that just doesn't make sense about the sublime, yet we find ourselves ready to throw ourselves headfirst into the it, without hesitation. Kant lays out these stakes, as he understands them, emphatically claiming that, "The Beautiful prepares us to love disinterestedly something, even nature itself; the Sublime prepares us to esteem something highly even in opposition to our own (sensible) interest."[38] Why can't we be just be sensible, and not be so extreme in our tastes and proclivities? As though Kant were a chiding parent, asking queers to 'tone it down,'[39] he hopes that we side more with the pleasures of the beautiful because, to him, these are *moral* and *good* pleasures, that unite and bind a common experience of humanity.[40] The problem, of course, is that disinterested systems of aesthetic relationality can never incorporate understandings of race, gender, or sexuality, because disinterestedness strives

[36] 20th Century thinkers like Hannah Arendt also developed a distrust of the sublime after the fall of fascism, since fascist states often evoked the sublime to make use of its rhetorical qualities, to move people into pledging subservience to the state. See Michael Halberstam, "Hannah Arendt on the Totalitarian Sublime and Its Promise of Freedom," In *Hannah Arendt In Jerusalem*, Edited by Steven E. Aschheim, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 105-122.
[37] Mark Canuel, *Justice, Dissent, And the Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 1-39.
[38] Kant, *Critique*, 134.
[39] Interestingly, Kant in his earlier work on aesthetics, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, remarks about seemingly 'grotesque' versions of the sublime, and proceeds to list both fops and dandies as figures whose affectations are approaching the sublime. This is another place where we can mark queerness haunting discourses of the sublime. There is a nagging suspicion that what he finds so abhorrent about fops and dandies are their queer performances of femininity. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on The Feeling of The Beautiful And Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 55.
[40] Kant, *Critique*, 251-252.

to obscure the body in the subject *and* the object.[41] Any aesthetic experience that orbits too closely to the body, under a Kantian understanding, might get burned up in the atmosphere of the sublime. The sublime then offers us an escape from the goals of a Kantian project which asks us to aesthetically engage with objects in a disinterested way—with a cautious and detached air. That is, disinterestedness is a reading practice that prevents the reader or audience from ever getting too close to the body—to do so would not bear the cool disconnect of disinterestedness.[42] The sublime is the aesthetic phenomena that can never be experienced in a disinterested way, because it is so thoroughly sensorial and embodied. I therefore see divas as a conduit for queer audiences to form themselves in highly *interested* ways, abandoning the rational for the hyperbolic methods of subject formation. I look to the sublime to find new strategies for escaping Kantian systems of disinterestedness that still prevent minoritized subjects from aesthetically forming themselves. The goals of queer theory align with the effects of the sublime because both are tied up with the slippery ontologies and bodies that are formed and found in these *interested* ways of being.

This project joins media scholar Brett Farmer who has laid out a crucial foundation for understanding queerness and diva worship through the sublime in his essay "The Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship." Perhaps most significant is his tethering of the concept of the sublime to queerness, highlighting the ways that the sublime slips in and out of form, expanding horizons of knowledge and embodiment through an experience of ecstasy, awe, and terror—which Farmer correctly claims is a very queer experience. I likewise agree with Farmer's definition of *queer sublimity* as "the transcendence of a limiting heteronormative materiality and

[41] Amelia Jones in *Body Art* argues that Kantian disinterestedness always precludes discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing The Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 5.
[42] Jones, *Body Art*, 5.

the sublime reconstruction, at least in fantasy, of a more capacious, kinder, queerer world." [43] However, I wish to modify Farmer's—and also Koestenbaum's—analysis and mode of examining divas, queerness, and the sublime in several key ways. First, as Farmer's analysis rests on a reading of the film *Philadelphia* and the character Andy's relationship to Maria Callas within the film, I want to instead pay more attention to the divas themselves within this dissertation, locating specific performers within their historical, cultural, and spatial contexts to consider how exactly divas sang to a queer constituency and evoke the sublime. Second, in contextualizing and historicizing diva performance, I will be able to more clearly map out the ways that divas not only gesture towards queer worlds through the sublime, but actually produce queer spaces. Lastly, and most importantly, Farmer's understanding of divas, the sublime, and queerness rests on a discussion of classic operatic divas, one which lacks a discussion of race. Although I follow Farmer's analysis which reveals the similarities and productive brushes between queerness and the sublime, I must critically add that the sublime is always queer *and* racialized. My contribution, then, to a growing conversation about divas, queerness, and the sublime is to chart the ways that divas have also become signifiers of race in the 20th/21st century, and to offer up the sublime as a hermeneutic for thinking about race and queerness in the same aesthetic moment.

A closer look at the foundational aesthetic theories of the sublime reveal the way that Enlightenment era aesthetic treatises are undergirded by the 'problem' of race and rely on the 'encounter' with the racial other. Within these aesthetic theories of the sublime, queerness is the thing which must never be discussed or alluded to, and race becomes that which is distanced from the European, 'rational' subject. I expand on the previous work written on the queerness of

[43] Brett Farmer, "The Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship," *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 59 (2005): 170.

divas by Koestenbaum and Farmer to further insist that divas are racialized figures, especially in the 20th and 21st century. In referring to race, I turn to Alex Weheliye's definition of blackness in *Habeus Viscus*, where blackness refers less to a series of essential behavioral criteria or biological characteristics that define black people or people of color broadly, but rather as "an articulated object of knowledge" that are made to exist in various degrees away from the category of the rational Western subject. [44] To elaborate further, Weheliye insists:

> Given the histories of slavery, colonialism, segregation, lynching, and so on, humanity has always been a principal question within black life and thought in the west; or, rather, in the moment in which *blackness becomes appositive to humanity*, Man's conditions of possibility lose their ontological thrust, because their limitations are rendered abundantly clear. Thus, the functioning of blackness as both inside and outside modernity sets the stage for a general theory of the human, and not its particular exception[45] [emphasis mine].

Thus, to Weheliye, what defines blackness and racial otherness most is the experience of not being granted full humanity, relegated to an almost-subject who inhabits the flesh, rather than the body. The category of the human never really accounts for non-white subjects, which always exceeds or eludes its parameters. Importantly, Weheliye understands blackness as 'both inside and outside modernity,' where Modernity relies on the exclusion of blackness, but also requires black bodies, either for labor or other often exploitative means. I argue that the sublime, as an aesthetic phenomenon, exists in a similarly precarious relation to Modernity. The sublime is the remainder, the leftover bits of what Modernity cannot account for. Blackness, just like the sublime, is thus embodied as simultaneously too much form and not enough form. It is overdetermined materiality alongside a negation of one's own ontology—a delicate dance between presence and absence. We see this play out across the aesthetic philosophy of Burke and

[44] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 19.
[45] Weheliye, *Habeaus Viscus*, 19.

Kant that sought to define the parameters of rationality and beauty—only at the exclusion of blackness and other modes of racial otherness.

Before he wrote the *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant's earlier 1764 work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime,* is an attempt to map out the aesthetic and moral differences in the experiences of the beautiful and sublime. The difference between the two often falls along racial lines, and accessing the moral high ground of beauty seems to be out of the question for those with black or brown bodies. Initially he notes that "[i]n fact, dark coloring and black eyes are more closely related to the sublime, blue eyes and blonde coloring to the beautiful." [46] At first glance, this hints at the racial understandings that underpin his theories of the sublime and beautiful. Outside of the parameters of the beautiful, though, to Kant, the sublime is more unruly, grotesque, moving, less refined; it exists in 'savagery.' Beauty is 'civilized,' 'moral,' 'right,' and 'rational.' Kant's distrust of the sublime betrays his distrust of non-white bodies, and his expression of this distrust creates a model of race that always portrays non-Western racial groups as lacking, savage, irrational. To Kant, the charms of the beauty are for Europeans to ascribe to, and the crazed, grotesque intensities of the sublime are all that the 'savages' outside of Europe can hope for. Kant takes a special pause on African blacks, describing their moral and aesthetic capabilities as intrinsically feeble.[47] The sublime provides us a rubric through which to understand the way race was and is still aestheticized. It seems that to Kant, the sublime is inhabited by a racial otherness that may never be congruent to the beautiful. To withhold access to the beautiful this way, or to the development of aesthetic feelings more broadly, is not merely to judge the supposed aesthetic sophistication of a racial or ethnic group,

[46] Kant, *Observations*, 54.
[47] Kant, *Observations*, 109-112.

but rather to withhold full subjectivity to those marked as black or brown,[48] thus signaling a return to Weheliye's argument about how blackness always exists just outside the parameters of Western subjectivity.

Edmund Burke's treatise *Of the Sublime and Beautiful* similarly presents race as that which undergirds the powerful and unruly aesthetic experience of the sublime. Burke famously tells the story of a child whose encounter with a black person could be understood as a sublime experience. He states,

> Mr. Cheselden has given us a very curious story of a boy, who had been born blind …; he was then couched for a cataract, by which operation he received his sight. Among many remarkable particulars that attended his first perceptions and judgments on visual objects, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight.[49]

Burke uses this anecdote to explain literally how an encounter with 'darkness' can produce the sublime. He gives darkness a body here in the 'negro woman.' The sublime interrupts, brings horror, questions the integrity of a world thought to be ordered (and white). He goes on, explaining that "Blackness is but a partial darkness;…it derives some of its powers from being mixed and surrounded with coloured bodies. In its own nature, it cannot be considered as a colour. Black bodies, reflecting none or but a few rays, with regard to sight, are but as so many vacant spaces dispersed among the objects we view."[50] Thus to Burke, the body 'marked' by race is theorized as absence, 'vacant spaces' that 'cannot be considered as a colour.' I emphasize

[48] Kant very clearly states that "the Beautiful is the symbol of the morally Good, and that it is only in this respect (a reference which is natural to every man and which every man postulates in others as a duty) that it gives pleasure with a claim for the agreement of every one else." Kant claims the beautiful is morally good and it is universally known or felt. But if you do not have access to this moral goodness, i.e. if you can never be beautiful, then your access to universality is precluded. To Kant, you are aesthetically, ethically, and ontologically lacking. See Kant, *Critique*, 250-251.

[49] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry,* 131.

[50] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 134.

these moments because they show us again how consistently ideas of race become enmeshed with these Enlightenment theories of the sublime.

The perhaps unintentional aesthetic construction of race in Burke and Kant's writing on the sublime bears a striking resemblance to the way that Frantz Fanon theorized the experience of blackness almost 300 years after the fact. In "Black Skin, White Masks," Fanon painstakingly details how race (to Fanon, this is specifically blackness) negotiates its own existence against paradigms that are accustomed to erasing it or reducing it to savagery. Just as in Burke's account of the sublime, where we see a child become terrorized at the reality of blackness, Fanon inhabits and speaks through a similar 'encounter' with blackness, famously stating "'Look, a Negro!' The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me."[51] Fanon's ontological project is one that (perhaps implicitly) responds to Burke's concept of blackness forming itself through a relation to others. Fanon says in "Black Skin, White Masks" that blackness is never truly formed at all in relation to whiteness or Western culture.[52] In one sense, both Burke and Fanon agree that blackness is the space of absence, of ontological emptiness, "a feeling of nonexistence." [53] Almost in response to Kant, Fanon understands how the black bodies, to a Western world, can never appear sophisticated, intelligent, charming, rational, or beautiful—the hallmarks of modern subjectivity.[54] Blackness to Fanon pivots on ontological spaces of absence and ambivalence, just as queerness occupies a space of excess and incorrectness—both rightly comingle with theories of the sublime. And both are important to

[51] Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Charles L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.
[52] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 109-112.
[53] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 139.
[54] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 125-138.

understand through the work that divas do through the rhetorical power of the sublime to provoke movement and action, or a sweeping gesture that opens a possibility for change, even in the space of ontological murkiness or unease. When a queer audience seeks out and encounters the diva, the powerful sensorial overload of the sublime makes this encounter tantamount to an encounter with the ontological impossibilities ascribed to the very configurations of queerness and race. The sublime is deeply embodied, deeply felt. To experience the sublime through diva performance is to find and feel one's own queer or racialized body.

These central texts on the sublime, and theories of race I've cited often explicitly name blackness as the raced concept that is defined by its merit of exclusion. However, it is not my intention to shuffle all understandings of race or racial otherness into the category of blackness, which authors like Weheliye and Fanon have painstakingly connected to the lived experiences and histories of African and African-diasporic communities. That being said, I do think that what Burke and Kant are doing in their work is creating a map of race as an expansive aesthetic field that excludes most (except certain Europeans) from full membership in modernity's rational and beautiful promises. This way, when thinking through diva performance and the sublime in this project, I can attend to the varying ways that race emerges on stage in the sublime evoked by diva performers.

Divas are figures produced by the institutions of modernity, but they hold an important function to spectacularize the emergence and crystallization of difference that modernity has brought. To Koestenbaum, "she is associated with difference itself, with a satanic separation from the whole, the clean, the contained, and the attractive."[55] This operates through the diva's ability to evoke the sensorial and affective experience of the sublime. The sublime is the thing

[55] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 104.

that modernity misses, can never account for. To Lyotard, this is the differend, the unresolvable remainder between culture and experience.[56] To Kant, the sublime is outside of rationality and reason – it compels the one who experiences it to abandon their logical faculties and follow the sublime in pursuit.[57] The sublime was designed as a category to separate race and queerness from the moral rightness of the Western subject, but in its creation there were also planted seeds of possibility for those ascribed to the irrationality of the sublime. The sublime is useful because it evokes change more fervently and more powerfully than other aesthetic categories like the beautiful. The sublime can become a powerful tool for minoritized publics to form themselves in such a way as to challenge dominant paradigms of sexuality of race. This rhetorical power of the sublime is often suspect, dangerous, capable of turning the wheels of fanaticism and fascism in the hands of the State. But, the diva is not usually an arm of the state. In the hands of the diva, the sublime has the power to garner and nourish a queer undercurrent of subjects that have a complicated and strained relationship to the modern nation. If queer subjects mimic, perform, and cross-identify with the staged difference of the diva, then difference itself becomes preserved in the face of a cultural thrust that moves towards a homogenous flattening.

Opera Glasses: Methods of Reading

Through the sublime, diva performance exaggerates the positions of bodies in difference. The diva crafts an aesthetic self through choreographing and augmenting her gender, sexuality, and/or race on stage. The movement and choreography of divas—moving on stage, moving through the city, touring the country, standing still—creates the perception of space that has become queered. The way that divas move and sing are significant performative practices in that

[56] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 234.
[57] Kant, *Critique*, 134.

they reveal—through their choreographic boundaries or sonic reverberations—the social and historical landscape of racialized and sexualized identities. Furthermore, they model the negotiation of difference on stage and the ways in which queerness itself is juggling competing identities and affects of selfhood. Each of the divas in my archive make visible and audible the queer possibilities inherent in bodies and spaces, performing in ways that combine body, voice, image, and text. Additionally, in writing this dissertation, I also want the voice and impact of each of the divas in my archive to sing out, hopefully igniting a curiosity and love for the performers inside this project, or rekindling a fondness for one's own divas. I hope that my rubric for thinking about divas might help my readers understand their own divas in better ways. That is, I want this project to beg the question to my reader, when did your diva become sublime to you, and what did that create, both in your community, and in your understanding of your body?

My claims are methodologically guided by Performance Studies, a relentlessly interdisciplinary field of study, and I draw from an array of texts of varying methodologies and approaches to make my contributions to this field, particularly literary studies, aesthetic philosophy, queer theory, and critical race theory. Each of these seemingly disparate and often overlapping fields are all asking questions about the body—what cultural or political forces form the contours of the body, and how do we theorize it? To get 'the whole story' of the diva, one must use interdisciplinary methods because the diva's own body is constructed intertextually, mediated by print, stage, and screen. This seemingly sundry methodological approach is necessary in a project which examines a cultural figure who is formed and best understood through disparate theoretical paradigms.

Radiant Divas: In Pursuit of the Queer Sublime creates a deliberate genealogy of diva performance which charts how specific performances of queer and spectacular femininities buttressed or bucked racial understandings of the body in the 20th and 21st Century. This project *is not* a fan studies project, and though I am interested in the relationship between the diva and her audience, I am not primarily asking *if* or *why* divas are important to queer communities—I take these assertions as a given. Instead, by following Koestenbaum's understanding of divadom as a social and cultural institution, I am asking questions about how divas have shaped the social terrain of queerness, and how queer communities have shaped the direction and evolution of diva performance. [58] I deliberately begin my genealogy of diva performance in the early 20th century, but it's not because divas hadn't existed before the 20th century. The opera diva is a considerably old figure in the history of modern performance, but this project *is not* a complete history of divas as a cultural phenomenon. Rather, I intend to show specific and important places in the long 20th century where divas—as an institution and phenomena of performance—are transforming, highlighting particular performers who I see as responsible for the mood and direction of diva performance within their particular historical and social idiom. Furthermore, I have chosen performers who all sing versions of "pop music," but exist slightly below the height of the mainstream in American cultural production. [59] I will discuss Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey—the mother of the blues, the model turned disco star turned avant-garde performer Grace Jones, the campy pop princess Kylie Minogue, and Nomi Ruiz, the Puerto Rican and transgender performer of the NYC underground music and art scene. In truth, my choice to bring together these

[58] For an example of an excellent fan studies project which examines how exactly gay men value their divas (Lady Gaga, in this case), See Craig Jennex, "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia," *Popular Music & Society* 36, no. 3, (2013): 343-359.

[59] Likewise, while I acknowledge that divas of many varieties exist—divas of the fashion world; Broadway divas; silver screen divas—I center my discussion on 'pop' divas as what I believe are the best and most robust examples of diva performance that evokes the full sensorium of queerness.

performers in this project is deeply personal. They have each moved me, changed me, and helped me to see the ways that diva performance generates a queerness that exists or circulates at the avant-garde margins or peripheries of culture. By admitting my fondness for these performers, some might balk at my methodological objectivity, but I would be disingenuous as a scholar to focus on the sublime pull that divas hold on their audiences without admitting the sublime pull that the divas within this dissertation have held on me.[60] The divas that I discuss in this dissertation let us engage with the sublime in profound ways, such that we see how the sublime is a generative cultural force, that it produces and creates something new. Divas seem to be suspiciously present at the cultural happenings or zeitgeists that tug expressive culture into uncharted domains. And the presence of divas in these cultural transitions/developments are causal; that is, divas are partly responsible *for* these changes and transitions in culture. This is because of the way that the spectacular body of the diva on stage develops a co-constitutive relationship with the everyday lives of those subjects in the audience. While this project investigates performance, I come to it through literature. So, to structure this genealogy, I discuss the literary drama, fiction, print culture, live performances, and digital performances that contain, or have been inspired by divas in order to frame each diva's relationship to queerness and race in its precise historical and cultural moment. Through this, I can better examine the important sonic legacies that divas are married to, especially the ever-present afterlives of opera, disco, and the blues in diva performance.

As much as possible, I've made it a point to be present for each of the performances that I discuss in this project—with the exceptions of performances in the early 20th century and Grace

[60] There are also, of course, several other divas who would fit well into this project, but I am simply unable to discuss them all within the conventional lengths of an academic monograph. Inevitably, people ask me if I am discussing [insert favorite diva], and it is always with some sadness on both sides that I must say that I am not. Personally, I regret not having the space or time to include sections on Nina Simone, Divine, or Kate Bush.

Jones's 1978 Roseland Ballroom performance (for these last ones, I was not yet born). Inasmuch as the more traditional archival aspects of research are important to this project, so too is learning a sense of the embodied and performative repertoire of divas, to draw from Diana Taylor.[61] For me, it is important to understand—firsthand—the immersive sensory experience of divas experienced on stage. Kylie Minogue, Grace Jones, and Nomi Ruiz each evoked the sublime, as I understand it. A frenzy of sensory data and a flood of affect washing into you, over you, through a crowd, pleasurably if anxiously overwhelming your faculties—every bodily sense is engaged, stretched. After the diva sings her encore, and the house lights go up, the post-coital exhaustion. Pleasurably smirking at the person next to you in the crowd, as if to say "Did we really just experience that? Was she real?" These are the aftershocks of experiencing the queer sublime in diva performance.

Now, I want to be careful here. I don't intend to romanticize the present in my methodology, claiming a kind of superiority in the moment of performance vis a vis 'liveness', and thereby rehashing a conversation in performance studies that explains how the 'burden of liveness' often weighs heavily on queers and/or racialized bodies.[62] But I do want to pose the question: What lives in the present that is useful for queers and other minoritized subjects? The present, the 'live' moment of diva performance is important in my methodology not because I think the sublime can't be experienced or felt in performance documentation, but because it's

[61] To Taylor, ""Archival" memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, cds, all those items supposedly resistant to change." While "The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory-performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing-in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge." Taylor's methodological intervention and defining of the terms of performance studies is useful because it acknowledges the reliance we have in scholarly pursuits on those 'stable' objects of the archive, while also making special space for how "The repertoire … allows scholars to trace traditions and influences." See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory In The Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 19-20.

[62] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146-151. See also Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 181-191.

only in this 'live' moment of diva performance that one can feel the immersiveness of the experience.[63] It is an altogether more specific kind of sublime. It's the sublime felt and shared by queers coming to find an experience of complete sensory immersion that centers around their diva, an "encounter with some large, threatening force that yet holds an inexplicable attraction," to return briefly to Tuan.[64] The diva's audience wants to see her "in the flesh," feel their ear drums blasted out by her voice, hope to reach far enough that she may touch their hands, smell the sweat of the bodies around them as they dance, and taste stale air become warm and vigorous as the sublime enters them. Though performance documentation often helps us to imagine ourselves in these felt spaces of immersion, they are sadly, but not unexpectedly, different from the "live" moment of experiencing a diva on stage. Diva performance gives a seeking queer audience access to a full sensorial of queerness.

The Diva's Labor

"She was, he thought, very much like any other charming woman, except that she was more so."
-Willa Cather, 'A Gold Slipper'[65]

The above description of the fictional Kitty Aryshire, an opera singer in Cather's 1917 short story "A Gold Slipper," shows the diva to be precisely this: more than charming, more than beautiful, something beyond that. Sublime. Excessive, even. In "A Gold Slipper," we find the beautiful and talented Kitty Aryshire accosting a curmudgeonly businessman, Marshall McKann,

[63] There are, of course, particularly excellent examples of performance documentation. Jonathan Demme's 1984 *Stop Making Sense*, a cinematic adaptation and mashup of a Talking Head concert tour, comes to mind. While *Stop Making Sense* and other works like it provide a pleasurable approximation of live performance, especially when screened in theatrical settings, it never quite matches the exact sensory experience and immersion of live performance.
[64] Tuan, *Passing Strange*, 144.
[65] Willa Cather, "A Gold Slipper," *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 148.

on the night train to New York. McKann represents the old, white, capitalist class of heterosexual men who deeply distrust any artform that is 'too much,' among which diva performance certainly falls. McKann's above description of Kitty, and this short story as a whole, help us to understand how the sublime is perceived by a white, heteronormative culture, and how the sublime can act as a queering force of opposition.

After slowly and painstakingly arguing with McKann in order to find out why he grumbled during Kitty's earlier concert, she comes to the painful realization that "Your morality seems to me the compromise of cowardice, apologetic and sneaking. When righteousness becomes alive and burning, you hate it as much as you do beauty. You want a little of each in your life, perhaps—adulterated, sterilized, with the sting taken out. It's true enough they are both fearsome things when they get loose in the world; they don't, often."[66] McKann's distaste for Kitty is not only regular-old sexism, but it also makes clear something more specific. As Kitty perceives it, McKann only has an interest in aesthetics or performance when they are 'adulterated, sterilized, with the sting taken out'—that is, when they are experienced with disinterestedness. When McKann can calmly go about his life afterward as if the aesthetic experience has neither moved him nor the world around him—that is the kind of aesthetic experience that McKann desires. Kitty's rebuke of McKann is crucial here to understand the stakes of diva performance in a public culture of spectacle that intimately distrusts the sublime and its evocations in feminine, queer, and black/brown bodies. Kitty desperately wishes to keep the 'sting' in performance, to perform in such a way that it pricks, barbs, or haunts.

As the story continues, Kitty leaves one of her gold high heels next to McKann while he falls asleep on the train. He awakens bewildered and irritated by Kitty's 'gift,' and though he

[66] Cather, "A Gold Slipper," 149.

tries to dispose of the shoe, it follows him, as a testament that "absurd things could happen to people of the most clocklike deportment."[67] The story ends insinuating that the gold slipper remains in McKann's life, but as a siphon on his joys and vitality. The shoe reminds him most definitely of his own personal orthodoxies of asceticism and the protestant work ethic, and the shoe's presence paints those characteristics as dull and flabby when placed next to the effervescence of Kitty Aryshire that the shoe evokes. Cather's story emphasizes that the diva's duty is one that challenges and disrupts the old white curmudgeons like McKann, even though at first glance, they'd seem to belong to the same social class. The diva might benefit from the cultural and economic capital that the patronage of the upper eschelons bring, but oftentimes the performances themselves do not solely serve these upper classes. Nor even, does the diva herself firmly belong in the upper class, wealthy though she may be. More importantly, the diva's performances serve those subjects like Paul in "Paul's Case," who experience the diva as a kind of conduit, an access point to queerness and the means to a budding imagination for how their life and world might be formed.

We can even understand Kitty Aryshire's rebuke as an extension of Lauren Berlant's concept of "diva citizenship." Though Berlant isn't talking about divas, per se, "diva citizenship" refers to

> a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subalterns political activity. Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation; as though recording an estranging voice-over to a film we have all already seen, she renarrates the dominant history as one that the abject people have once lived sotto voce…and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to

[67] Cather, "A Gold Slipper," 152.

> produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent. [68]

Berlant's concept of 'diva citizenship' is helpful if only because it emphasizes the relationship that divas have with an imagined or actual emerging minoritized community. Furthermore, this concept of 'diva citizenship' rests on action and movement, an incitement in the audience that the diva is singing to. So while 'diva citizenship' is enacted by someone without social privilege in the public sphere, divas themselves *do have* oftentimes a social platform and a great deal of privilege. And though a diva like Kitty Aryshire is not necessarily making a public eruption in her rebuke of McKann within the world of the short story, an audience of queer or feminine readers are called to identify with Kitty's position, and to cheer-on her painting of McKann's life and achievements as empty, uninspired, and wanly rote. This movement and incitement that divas bring is emblematic of their ability to summon the sublime on stage, or in their 'presence' as a public figure who is larger-than-life. As each performer in this dissertation invariably performs acts of 'diva citizenship,' we find that 'diva citizenship' is an eruption of the sublime.

But the diva doesn't only 'startle the public' as Berlant says above; divas provoke action or consolidate an audience through the formation of queer counterpublics. As defined by Michael Warner, "Counterpublics are 'counter' to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects."[69] Much of Warner's understanding of counterpublicity hinges upon groups of strangers experiencing an address or cultural text that is "laden with intimate affect, … [but] extended

[68] Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.
[69] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 121-122.

impersonally, available for co-membership on the basis of mere attention."[70] Understood this way, divas usually address an audience intensely but impersonally, whether on stage, over the radio, or through another listening or viewing platform. The counterpublic forms through a group of strangers identifying with and listening to this address from the diva. Deborah Paredez's important work on the late Tejana diva Selena Quintanilla diligently explains how divas produce this counterpublicity, and how Selena embodies the affects, memories, and histories embedded in a particular geopolitical region. Even after Selena's death, *Selenidad* continues, a phenomenon of devotion that goes beyond celebrity fandom, becoming instead a region's cultural iconography.[71] Similarly, it's hard to imagine a discussion of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, 'The Mother of the Blues,' without also thinking about how her performance of the classic blues was deeply tied to a black Southern sensibility, and how her life as a touring blues artist and recording artist shaped the cultural terrain of the rural South and urban cities of the Midwest. Divas have a life and a cultural presence that shapes communities and audiences long after they can no longer perform on stage. This is what divas do. They leave an impression, a mark, on a public. Sometimes that impression or mark is gentle, like a kiss, or a gesture of joy and frivolity to hang onto. Other times that impression is a roar, a call to be defiant and strange. Still in other instances that impression is like Kitty Aryshire's parting 'gift' to Marshall McKann, which breaks the skin of a public or a way of thinking, serving as a reminder to a public that things can and should be queerer. This impression, this reminder, aligns with Jeanne Scheper's suggestion that "One way to recognize and remember the politics of diva iconicity, as well as its limits, is to widen the

[70] Warner, *Publics*, 121-122.
[71] See Deborah Parédez, *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, And the Performance of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

frame of the archive, … by looking at the ways in which a diva's iconicity does or does not persist and how it is remembered and invoked in the ensuing decades."[72]

In this way, acknowledging that one has heard the address of the diva is a kind of social marking, especially to queer subjects for whom diva worship can be a marker of queerness itself. The counterpublicity formed by divas is not unilaterally opposed to the goals or missions of the heteronormative public in the US, but it still bears the subordinate status that Warner claims is representative of counterpublicity.[73] That is, divas do not have the power or ability to dismantle the institutions of capitalism, the state, or state sanctioned heteronormativity, but their songs reach an audience in such a way that the formation of queer bodies, desires, and intimacies circulate *through* the act of listening to the diva. To Roland Barthes, listening to the voice is the means through which one not only accesses and experiences the Other, but the means through which one recognizes the body, affect, and psychic interiority of the Other.[74] When queer subjects listen to the voice of the diva, whether live on stage or in recording, whether it is Grace Jones, Kylie Minogue, Nomi Ruiz, or 'Ma' Rainey, they are a gathered audience communally participating in a sensorial encounter with difference. As I have stated throughout, diva worship in the audience of the diva is not merely a static act of listening, but a process of becoming. More specifically, Josh Kun describes the process of listening as an act of becoming strange, crafting an affinity of strangeness among strangers while one listens to the performing other who is strange.[75] How might listening to divas make one sociably strange? Barry Shank carries this idea even further, claiming that music carries an "affective charge, [which] if successful, could

[72] Scheper, *Moving Performances*, 168-169.
[73] Warner, *Publics*, 57.
[74] Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, And Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 254-255.
[75] Kun, *Audiotopia*, 16.

consolidate an emergent identity with real political force. The affective power of musico-cultural figures can change the relationship of the ethnos to the demos, shifting the relations of those who are legitimately included inside the political community."[76] Thus this project seeks to not only answer questions about the ontology of queerness and race through diva performance, but also seeks to answer questions about the *culture* and sociality of queerness and race engendered by diva performance.

It is worth noting that some feminine performers of spectacle *do not* create a counterpublic; they might more appropriately create what Warner would call a 'sub-public,' where though a group of strangers might collectively listen and embrace a feminine performer, their membership in that group of listening does not 'queer' them. Taylor Swift, for instance, might amass a group of listeners whose interest in her does not actually mark them as subordinate or queer—but rather profoundly normal with relationship to the public. The divas in my archive within this project, by contrast, produce a counterpublicity that represents specific queer and racialized audiences/communities. This production of counterpublicity is crucial to a definition of diva within this project, and to an ongoing understanding of how divas function within a cultural imaginary.

The Libretto

"Not many seem to know Eartha Kitt's name. But they know her voice. … Sometimes they say, 'Where do you find these people?' They are the faces on the edge of the spotlight. They are the crackling noise of records somebody collected in his lonely adolescence, too many of them, more than one person can hold."[77] – D.A. Powell, in *My Diva*

[76] Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham: Duke University Press. 2014), 16.
[77] D.A. Powell, "Eartha Kitt: 'Purrrfectly Detached,'" *My Diva: 65 Gay Men On The Women Who Inspire Them*, edited by Michael Montlack, (Madison: Terrace Books, 2009), 98.

In a collection of essays where gay men reflect on their love of divas, D.A. Powell remininsces in the passage above about Eartha Kitt, and reflects on the process through which queers seek 'faces on the edge of the spotlight,' the voices and figures in the corners and cracks, even as friends and family are bewildered by the obsessive and overly effusive investment in these performers. 'Where do you find these people?' also implies 'This is too weird for me.' Or even 'Why would you continue to listen *after* you found them?' Divas inhabit the cultural margins, the after-hours, the underground, the outdated, the overlooked places where queers seek the sublime and find divas poised there. Perhaps this process of finding our divas is not wholly a process of our choosing; sometimes it seems as though our divas find us, that divas play an active role in gathering a consortium of queerness in space and time. Just as the imposing frame of Olive Fremstad beckons to her readers in the pages of McClure's Magazine, or, just as Kylie Minogue descended from the ceiling of the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City, wearing otherworldly space-couture and promising to take us away, divas beckon to us, seeming to say 'come with me.' The following chapters not only provide examples of the divas who have 'found' me, but I also argue that these specific divas show us the most lively and robust moments in the 20th and 21st century where divas—in confluence or conflict with the musical and cultural forms of their era—create influential legacies in their own embodiment and staged interpretation of race and queerness.

Each chapter of *Radiant Divas: In Pursuit of the Queer Sublime* examines the ways that divas have changed throughout the 20th century, and into the 21st century, investigating how divas in the 20th and 21st became figures who always perform and stretch the boundaries of queerness and race. To begin this trajectory, the first chapter of my dissertation attempts to historicize shifting representations of divas in the early to middle part of the 20th century through

examining the literary and musical traditions that spoke to diva performance at the time. I will first investigate Willa Cather's 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark,* which used the sublime figure of the diva, here modeled after Olive Fremstad, to index queerness through the white upper-class institution of opera. as a genealogical cornerstone, which helps me to chart the ways that divas, queerness, and the sublime were conceived in opera and literature in the early 20th century. Specifically, *The Song of the Lark* acts as a genealogical cornerstone within this dissertation, and helps to explains both the ways that the diva's voice creates queer desires and identity positions, and the ways that divas themselves are queer figures. With this in mind, I propose Ma Rainey, the "Mother of the Blues," as an important figure in the same time period in the early 20th century that not only sutures the diva to queerness, but also marks the emergence of the pop music diva as a woman of color who performs both queerness and blackness—through the blues. I will consider the extensive print history of Rainey's career documented in *The Chicago Defender* and other primarily black publications, and also. Additionally, I will also discuss other later 20th century literary texts who carry on Rainey's legacy by engaging with the figure of the blues diva, including the fictional retelling of Rainey in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.* I believe that focusing on Rainey and her performance of race and queerness through the blues offers a counter-narrative to the diva identifications that Koestenbaum highlights, which rely on a white, cosmopolitan form of queerness. Granting 'Ma' Rainey 'diva status' allows us to see how some divas are able to sing the subcultural, racialized, and queer affects of communities that are disallowed from the worlds of opera and classical music, thus creating a transition away from thinking of divas only as white figures of opera and high-culture.

As both black and queer subjects flocked to major cities in the early to mid-twentieth Century,[78] the sounds created in these urban spaces by divas and their music producers were crucial to the development of social and sexual spaces that were both queer and black—particularly the disco era. In New York City of the 1970s, the blues diva becomes the disco diva. Chapter two of my dissertation thinks about how diva performance itself can enliven and the queer and racialized communities that they emerge from, calling them to dance and touch in turn. Here I will investigate the once dubbed 'Queen of the Gay Discos' turned-avant-garde pop performer Grace Jones and her place as an icon within gay nightlife located in NYC from 1978-2012. Both 'Ma' Rainey and Jones exemplify the ways that divas always spectacularize queerness and race, but the spatial dynamics of urban disco spaces contextualize and historicize Jones's performance style as importantly different from Rainey's. Jones's rise to disco stardom dovetailed with the height of a particular kind of queer public sex culture in disco that was relying on divas as figures that would animate and dictate the ways that queer and/or brown/black bodies would come together on the dance floor. The main primary texts I will examine are Jones's 1978 performance at Roseland Ballroom in NYC, and her 2012 'Return to Roseland' performance. Drawing from Julia Kristeva's treatise on the abject, I contend that Jones evokes the sublime through inhabiting the abject; Jones's abject body, and her 'messy' performance style disburses queer affects to a wanting audience that demands pain, pleasure and chaos. While 'Ma' Rainey's success as a diva was predicated upon her ability to tour, sell

[78] John D'Emilio, in his classic essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," argues that the new availability of jobs and the possibility for work in urban areas allowed those with same-sex desires to leave the nuclear family and develop distinct queer subcultures. Likewise Ethan Michaeli, in his study of the Chicago-based black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, explains how the *Defender* played a powerful role in encouraging The Great Migration. See John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 469-471. See also Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America: From The Age Of The Pullman Porters To The Age Of Obama* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2016) 62-84.

records, and amass a following of mostly black listeners/viewers in Southern and rural parts of the United States, Jones's strategy for achieving influence as a diva instead stems both from a strategic manipulation of the desire of white gay audiences, and also simultaneously expanding the embodied horizon for a specifically black queerness through disco and the avant-garde. Even though the changing face of NYC since disco shows the strength of late capitalism at normativizing a queer constituency, through the losses brought by HIV/AIDS, gentrification of neighborhoods, and the scouring of public sex, Jones has remained a symbolic and important figure of a gayness that is 'a little off,' or queer. She speaks to the lingering interest in a queerness and blackness that is messy and defies being subsumed or assimilated into the mainstream.

Just as Grace Jones's prominence began to fade in the late 1980s due to the decimation of queer audiences at the hands of AIDS and the processes of gentrification that changed the legendary party scenes that nourished her fame, the Australian soap-opera star-turned 'pop princess' Kylie Minogue began releasing cheesy, mass-marketed, campy teen music to American and global audiences. The third chapter of my dissertation will examine Minogue and how her campiness continually displaces her to a marginal position within an American pantheon of divas. I will look at Minogue's early music and music video performances, while also considering the importance of her live performances, particularly her 2009 *For You, For Me* tour and 2011 *Les Folies* tour. Minogue's campiness begs an examination of camp's complicated relationship to definitions of both the beautiful *and* the sublime. Minogue's 'beautiful' charm is inflected and infected by intense and outré sublimity that defies intelligibility. This consistent campy performance ethos allows Minogue's whiteness to emerge and become visible, when whiteness itself finds ways to obscures its own powers and privileges. The 'failed seriousness' of

camp provides a lens by which we can see Minogue's whiteness as 'downgraded,' in a state of failure, which distances her from other white performers within an American cultural idiom. A campy sublime, as performed by Minogue, destabilizes the perceived naturalness of whiteness, and it problematizes the narrative of American exceptionalism and meritocracy that follows other divas like Madonna who sees her success solely on account of serious 'hard work,' and not in any way connected to white privilege and the appropriation of other cultures.

The fourth chapter of this project considers the performer Nomi Ruiz (of *Hercules and Love Affair* and *Jessica 6*), and her recent contributions to diva performance within a NYC that has vastly changed since the days of disco. Ruiz's music gestures to the electro dance-pop of Minogue while Ruiz herself navigates the musical landscape of NYC in a similar way to Jones, using dance music as an avant-garde aesthetic strategy to gather queer audiences together, and to keep them dancing and singing along with her. Her rise as a transgender musician within the underground hip hop and dance scene in NYC speaks to a choreography of queerness that perpetually seeks the margins and cracks. Ruiz evokes the sublime by transforming formlessness into something flawless, thereby changing the perceptual game through which transgender and Puerto Rican subjects are typically scanned for the detection of their 'flaws.' In reading Ruiz's performance work around NYC, and in her own written reflections as a musician, I find that Ruiz's performance of flawlessness speaks to how she is trying to create a space for the feminine trans body in a cultural moment where violence is a common response to such a body's presence. This bodily choreography of flawlessness allows Ruiz to balance, navigate, and sometimes defy the expectations of her trans and Puerto Rican identity. Just as 'Ma' Rainey was able to consolidate a sonic and felt terrain of a subculture through the development of the blues, so too is Ruiz able to sing subcultural and queer spaces into being, despite the political and economic

conditions that make life precarious for queer and brown bodies. Ruiz ascends to divadom because her own flawlessness is an insistence than queer and brown bodies are not impossible or inconceivable—the 'errors' of ontology or epistemology—she reminds us that queerness will insist on finding new ways of living through the diva.

Radiant Divas: In Pursuit of the Queer Sublime contends that a sustained attention to divas reveals the spectacular ways that queerness presents itself and preserves itself, both in the body of the diva and the body politic that adores and identifies with them. The diva is both voice and body, ethereal and material. She sings and stages the sublime—when she sings and dances, she asks her audience to join this celebration, and to sing and move like her. This is the moment where the diva and her audience meet; where the performer is both disembodied and hyper-embodied. To an audience, the diva becomes the icon who is both 'like me,' and productively 'not like me,' stretching the boundaries of the body now and creating affinities and possibilities for the body in the future. The sublime is relentlessly attached to the sensorial and to the form and contours of the body. The sublime explains the power that divas hold for a queer audience that thirsts for divas; it defies a position of disinterestedness, and instead invokes a sensory investment in queerness through the spectacle of diva performance. And I don't want this project to carry the burden of disinterestedness—the expectation that we engage with our aesthetic objects at a cautious distance, never getting too close. The sublime disallows that. So do divas. I want us to move closer to divas, closer to the sublime, closer to an understanding of the interconnectedness of queerness and race.

The sublime brings us to the formlessness and protoplasmic potential that queerness so desperately seeks. The relationship between a queer audience and the diva on stage reveals to us an aspect of queerness itself that is always mobile, always in pursuit of something spectacular

and ineffably beyond itself. While queers have historically pursued many things politically and materially, what most fascinates me is how queers have consistently sought the more ethereal queer sublime. We seek divas as conduits for the queer sublime not because we are lacking, but because queerness is—among many other things—the pleasure of possibility and the restructuring of the body in real space and time. To be queer is to revel in these pleasurable possibilities and perpetually, repeatedly pursue them, never fully settling or crystalizing into a recognizable form. Divas are invariably complicated figures who wear their bodies in exceptional and sometimes unpredictable ways, sublimely unknowable, but pleasurably felt when we are in their sensory proximity. Divas, whether they realize it or not, have consistently mobilized queerness to take new forms and shapes throughout the long 20th century. All the while, queers themselves have pursued the diva as the emblem of the queer sublime, following the diva's example into unknown and spectacular ways of being. We must pursue the queer sublime. We must pursue this potential to become what we are not yet.

Chapter 1

A Tale of Two Divas:
Opera Stars and the Emerging Ma Rainey

Diva performance in the early twentieth century might best be theorized as 'A Tale of Two Divas' because it is this historical moment when the figure of the diva expanded in scope and audience. It is in this period that we find genealogical cornerstones for thinking about divas, queerness, and race in the same breath. To understand the cultural impact that divas held during this historical moment, one needs to explore the multiple cultural trajectories through which divas were being imagined and represented in the early twentieth century. As such, it is my intent in this chapter to show the ways divas were being fashioned and refashioned through fiction, an emerging record industry, and (oftentimes traveling) live performance. At this time, industrialization in the United States brought new wealthy and working class people to urban areas who eventually sought cultural activities to patronize and immerse themselves in—whether this was going to the opera, reading new literary works, or listening to music through newly available technologies.[79] Significantly, the figure of the diva, as a sign of female artistry and theatricality, found its way into the fiction of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, perhaps most famously by Willa Cather, who used opera singers as characters in several of her short stories and novels. Simultaneously, the development of recording technologies ushered in new performative possibilities, fan-bases, economies, and afterlives for divas, particular those divas who performed *outside* of the high-cultural worlds of opera. This period in the early twentieth century marks a transition away from thinking of divas only as white figures of opera and high-

[79] John D'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity" explains how these same processes of industrialization also brought the jobs and opportunities which allowed for "the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men." See D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 470. Likewise, the development of an urban working class is part of the context for how queer communities were able to form, and through which these same queer communities eventually sought divas on stage, in literature, or in recorded music.

culture, and opens up possibilities for divas of color to perform race through popular musical forms like the blues. This is significant if we want to think about divas as embodying a queerness that is simultaneously about race.

In order to tell the tale of two divas—those divas of opera and the blues—I center my discussion on two symbolic figures—one fictional, based on a real person, and one factual, who inspired fictional reinterpretations—who best exemplify the conceptualizations of divadom in the early twentieth century. First, I focus on Thea Kronborg, the fictional white opera singer and heroine of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, who was modelled after the opera star Olive Fremstad. Second, I offer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, the 'Mother of the Blues,' as a historically significant and symbolic figure who played a starring role in blues music's rise in popularity and its proliferation in record form, and who emerged as a recording artist around roughly the same time as Cather's writing on divas.[80] Both Rainey and Thea Kronborg engender queer legacies and admiration, but they evoke the spectacle of divas through different cultural forms—opera and the blues, respectively.

While it is commonly accepted that diva worship exists squarely in the realm of gay male culture, lesbian desires and cross-identifications likewise bloom out of the experience of diva worship. In both *The Song of the Lark* and 'Ma' Rainey's career, women's sexuality becomes queered through a connection to divas; lesbian desires emerge from the shadows, or rather through the voice, of the diva. This chapter considers some of the ways that women's sexuality becomes queered through a connection to divas, and the way that lesbian desires emerge in the shadows of, or through the voice of the diva. In *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle correctly points out that "…there is in fact a long tradition of 'sapphic' diva-worship in the world of opera:

[80] *The Song of the Lark* was first published in 1915, and Rainey recorded her first record in 1923.

a history of female-to-female 'fan' attachments as intense, fantastical, and sentimental as any…" and, in regards to the role of opera in developing and forming the queer desires of women, she states "…the opera house (along with the theater) was one of only a few public spaces in which a woman could openly admire another woman's body…all in an atmosphere of heightened emotional and powerful sensual arousal. It is no wonder that for women whose erotic interest in other women was strong—the young Willa Cather, for example—the opera house should become almost a holy site…Venusberg of the homoerotic"[81] The mention of Cather here by Castle is no accident, as her admiration of and brief friendship with opera singer Olive Fremstad helped to inform her design of Thea Kronborg as the heroine of *The Song of the Lark*. Not only that, but Cather's own feelings towards Fremstad and the way she hungrily sought out Fremstad's voice best encapsulate the queerness of diva worship itself, and the pursuit of the sublime.[82] Queerness seeks out those formless and unintelligible moments of sublimity, and through this the sublime aesthetically and sensorially gives voice and substance to protean or ineffable feelings of queerness. Rainey's performance of sexuality in the blues club or in her traveling show was famous for their sometimes-lesbian leanings. The print advertisements that contributed to her larger-than-life status likewise gestured towards same-sex desire. Even though the sexuality of black women performers is often overdetermined, such oversexualization usually rests on assumptions of heterosexuality and can inadvertently obscure potentials for lesbian desire and identification. As such, it is important to note that Rainey's performances of sexuality elicited and explored *lesbian* desire.[83]

---

[81] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 202-203.

[82] After a meeting with Fremstad, Cather recalls that she was," choked up by things unutterable." See James Leslie Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 253.

[83] Castle also briefly mentions Ma Rainey among the gamut of lesbians or queer women in the early 20th century who were largely responsible for the cultural and creative movements of the time period. Though I wish Castle

Figures like 'Ma' Rainey were absent from the fiction of these white authors like Cather, and the divas of the opera world were predominantly white. [84] But black communities in the early twentieth century were not less invested in the effects of performance or literature, and the black voices which entered the entertainment industry have held esteem and longevity, particularly when compared to their singing white counterparts. Rainey, as the 'mother of the blues,' was always aligned with a musical art form that was sometimes considered too lowbrow, too southern, too poor, and too black, signaling the important stakes in placing her firmly at the root of a genealogy of twentieth-century divas. Sterling Brown's poem "Ma Rainey" does offer one of the few literary nods from the period which acknowledged blues divas and the cultural work they perform, but it wasn't until the latter half of the twentieth century that the literature of African American authors and scholars more vigorously explored the role of blues singers within a genealogy of black performance. To illustrate Rainey's literary lineage, thereby investigating the long-term effects that blues divas have held on the black queer cultural imaginary, I will focus on August Wilson's dramatic interpretation of Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and the engagements with the figure of the blues singer provided in the fiction of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I therefore contend that 'Ma' Rainey is the crucial and iconic pivot in this performance genealogy of my larger project. Though there were successful black singers and performers before Rainey who could rightly be called divas, her

would have ruminated on Rainey a bit more, it does offer us a chance to see that the emergence of blues and jazz is an accompaniment to the Modernism of Stein or Cather. And in this way, that Rainey was *not* a marginal figure, in fact a leading figure of a kind of black modernism. See Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 18.

[84] This does not, of course, suggest that there *weren't* black operatic divas. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was considered a well-known and talented black vocalist of the 19th century, dubbed "The Black Swan," but perhaps Marian Anderson carries more importance among black opera singers from being the first to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. She did not, however, sing at the Met until 1955, years after the deaths of both Cather and Rainey. The songs of the opera world, though, are invariably *from, about,* and *for* white people, while the blues was always deeply invested in the experiences and feelings of blackness in the Unites States. This gestures towards a not only American experience of race and blackness, but of a uniquely American form of queerness emerging, as well.

performance of the blues and its success on stage and in record form suggests a vital materialization of blackness and queerness *through* these stage shows and recording technologies. Rainey exemplifies what divas do best – in responding to the psychic fantasies for something impossible or unseen, they leave material and sensorial marks on a culture in such a way that allows queerness and blackness to emerge as embodied possibilities.

Lofty Goals – Thea Unfulfilled

Willa Cather's third novel, the 1915 bildungsroman of female artistry, *The Song of the Lark*, chronicles Thea Kronborg's youth, training, and eventual rise to prominence as an operatic soprano. The novel fictionalizes aspects of Cather's own upbringing and life, while also modeling Thea Kronborg's opera career from the popular early twentieth century American opera singer, Olive Fremstad. The novel is never as roundly praised as *My Ántonia, Death Comes for the Archbishop*, or *One of Ours*. Many years after its release, and after her friendship with Olive Fremstad had waned, Cather expressed ambivalence about the novel, most noticeably in a foreward to a 1932 printing of the novel, where she laid bare her own novel's perceived shortcomings to the reader.[85] Thematically, it differs from Cather's other novels in the "prairie trilogy," as it eventually leaves the Great Plains to follow the rush, ambitions, risks, and cultural highs of city life. Contrary to the rustic Ántonia who thrives in rural Nebraska, Cather paints the diva in Thea Kronborg as a figure who *must* inhabit the city to achieve her glory. The small towns which often produce the diva must yield and surrender the diva to the venues and audiences of the urban. By bringing our attention to *The Song of the Lark*, we begin to see the constitution of queer feelings and sensations that divas bring to the spaces they inhabit. Marilee

[85] Cather, *The Song of the Lark,* 433.

Lindeman claims that an implicit queering of the American literary imagination was one of the effects of Cather's fiction.[86] So by paying close attention to Thea Kronborg's own narrated feelings throughout the novel, we find that the text paints divas as themselves queer, as much as they perform acts of cultural *queering.* The figure of the diva therefore becomes the identificatory vessel by which queerness can be explored—both Cather's own queerness and the queer America that she was imagining the foundation of. To that effect, divas always provoke questions of transformations and reimaginings, as Jonathan Goldberg eloquently states in his study of Cather, asking "It's impossible: how does one become someone else? A worn out woman a dazzling diva?"[87] Though Goldberg cites these as the central questions guiding Cather's work and *The Song of the Lark* in particular, he goes on to complicate this too-easy metaphorization of Cather's own amorous feelings for Fremstad as the basis for how such transformations take place. Admittedly, I'm less interested here in diving into the debates about Cather's relationship to Fremstad and its effect on *The Song of the Lark,* than I am in thinking about how Cather makes divas into vessels for queer transformation, both in the cultural realm and to individuals. Similarly, I depart from previous work on Cather which examines her relationships and attachments to other women and fictional characters in her life and career as a way to 'prove' or cement her lesbianism or attraction to women. I instead want to start off assuming Cather's queerness in medias res, and think about divas like Thea Kronborg as literary devices that allow queerness to become felt and sensorially legible. The figure of the diva in literature therefore becomes the identificatory vessel by which queerness can be explored.

[86] Lindeman points us to a queerness in Cather's fiction that follows "a process of making and unmaking, settling and unsettling that operates at times on the surface and at times on the deep structures of her fiction." See Marilee Lindeman, *Willa Cather, Queering America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 4.
[87] Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 47.

Thea Kronborg's own queerness emerges in her queer feelings: namely her shame at being different from those around her, and her shame at having secret talents.[88] As the novel progresses, shame eventually transforms into vocal energies that engender queer spaces of sublimity and ecstasy by the end of the novel. In Moonstone, Colorado, where we first meet Thea, we find that those around her are constantly getting a 'sense' that something is unusual about her, and they so often struggle to describe what that 'something' is. In the first few scenes of the novel, the local physician Dr. Archie comes to examine and treat a very sick Thea. The narrator, in free indirect discourse, ponders, "…he felt her head thoughtfully with the tips of his fingers. No, he couldn't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her…as if some fairy godmother had caressed her…and left a cryptic promise" (6). [89] This legibility of 'difference' as a mark of queerness is crucial within the novel for considering how Cather is setting up the diva as a figure that *must* be read as queer in order for her to receive the training and discipline that precedes operatic success That is, everyone that Thea encounters *must* be able to tell that she is *different*. Her queerness is also usually a mark of her 'talent' or artistic imagination.

Thea's own talents and ambitions are not so secret as she may believe, and her own acceptance of them is arguably one of the main struggles of the novel. Her music teacher, the wizened professor Wunsch, during a piano lesson, seems to reach into Thea's unconscious, divining her secret desires to sing. Toying with her, Wunsch says "You would better marry some

[88] Eve Sedgwick claims that queerness is affective in definition because it arises from a feeling that one's desires do not properly line up, that is, what you want is not what you should want, or what you can access. See Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6-13.

[89] Pope and Leonardi also draw attention to this scene between Dr. Archie and Thea, but by only citing half of the passage, they draw the conclusion that Thea's queerness is *not* mapped onto her body, or that Dr. Archie is *unable* to read such difference on her body as a portent into her future talent and ability. The whole passage, though, complicates this reading because there is *something* that Dr. Archie perceives of as difference, even if it's not measurable in his examination. This begs the question, how *does* queerness make its mark on the body, if that mark cannot be read? See Pope and Leonardi, *The Diva's Mouth*, 98.

Jacob here and keep the house for him, may-be? That is as one desire.'…Thea flashed up at him a clear, laughing look. 'No, I don't want to do that. You know" (49). Her inchoate desires begin to form here – somehow *knowin*g at 12 years old that housewifery is not in the cards for her, and she begins to fantasize about the possibility of her voice emerging. This moment is also, significantly, a place where Thea's queerness asserts itself because heterosexual coupling is not nearly as important as her secret ambitions.[90] These fantasies of the voice, inchoate as they are, bring her brief moments of happiness and ecstasy that bubble up within her. Even though she knows her destiny lies in her voice, that knowledge is described as "a secret between her and Wunsch. Together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer, and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen; but neither of them forgot it" (52). Thea's self-knowledge begins to form at the same moment she begins to ponder the possibility of her voice.

At this moment in the novel, Thea is unaware of her destiny as a famous opera Diva, but the shame she feels as the result of her building talents most sharpens the possibility that she might just become an opera Diva.[91] Fortune and circumstance aid Thea as the novel progresses, and she finds herself in a new city, Chicago, and under the training of the more rigorous musical coach, Andor Harsanyi. Harsanyi is somewhat mystified by Thea's unfocused talents and her lingering insistence on becoming a *pianist*. Again, we see that Thea's own unspoken desires out themselves, and Harsanyi has a frustrated confrontation with Thea, lecturing her that

> 'You are not by nature; I think a pianist…Let us talk frankly now…What you want more than anything else in the world is to be an artist; is that true?' She turned her face away from him and looked down at the keyboard. Her answer came in a thickened voice. 'Yes,

[90] Cather reveals to us, at the very end of the novel, that Thea *has* married Fred Ottenberg, but you could almost miss it among the rest of the denouement. While this could just be another moment of Cather favoring the process of a life over 'achievements,' it could also betray Cather's own attitudes towards heterosexuality as otiose. See Lindemann, *Queering America*, 5

[91] This insight is indebted to Eve Sedgwick's claim that "shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is." See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 37.

> I suppose so.' 'When did you first feel that you wanted to be an artist?' 'I don't know. There was always – something.' 'Did you never think that you were going to sing?...Miss Kronborg, answer me this. You *know that you can sing*, do you not? You have always known it. While we worked here together you sometimes said to yourself, "I have something you know nothing about; I could surprise you." Is that also true?' Thea nodded and hung her head (136-137).

No matter how strong her shame, Thea's desires reveal themselves. Harsanyi reads her timid mien and unparalleled discipline as a deliberate strategy that obscures something hidden. He also associates being a singer as congruent to being an artist. This gives us a moment of insight into thinking about how Cather is developing the figure of the Diva within *The Song of the Lark*; the diva as artist sacrifices everything for her art. The creative life eclipses the personal, in Cather's model of artistry.[92] To Cather, Divas are formed through a rocky relationship with their own talents and abilities, because these talents and abilities ultimately become the queering force that marks their bodies as different from those around them. This moment also registers Thea's growing acceptance of the fact that she is different, that her life will be lived queerly, with pursuits and dreams that many around her cannot or will not understand. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Touching Feeling* goes on to describe shame as an affect that "intensifies or alters the meaning of – almost anything."[93] This is what Sedgwick means when she describes shame as 'productive,'—Thea's experience with shame only sets her down the road of queerness more firmly[94]. Thus, to Thea, the shame at her own hopes or dreams of singing, and the secrecy by which she surrounds those hopes and dreams, only serves to intensify the pull those dreams have on her within the novel. Her shame only intensifies the possibilities and probabilities of what she might become.

[92] Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, 433.
[93] Segdwick, *Touching Feeling,* 62.
[94] Segdwick, *Touching Feeling,* 64-65.

Singing Queerness into Being

Thea's voice becomes her body – the heft of her personality and self. In his classic work on the relationship between opera divas and queerness, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Myster of Desire*, Wayne Koestenbaum declares that, "…when we hear an opera, we are listening not only to the libretto and to the music, but to a story about the body, and the story of a journey: the voyage of 'voice,' traveling out from hiddenness into the world" (155). It is no surprise that this 'voyage of voice' nears completion when Thea lands her 'big break,' Specifically, Thea one day receives a call that the Soprano playing the part of *Sieglinde* in the Metropolitan Opera's production of Richard Wagner's *Die Walkure* has fallen ill and cannot finish the second act—the management turns desperately to Thea Kronborg, who knows the part, but has not rehearsed in years (278). Thea, of course, performs miraculously, which opens up another chance for her to perform as *Sieglinde*, properly (not accidentally this time), thus approaching the sublime ending and climax of the novel.

Brett Farmer insists that the way we most vividly see the overlap between queerness and the sublime is through the vessel of opera. In his discussion, Farmer states that "the central movement of the sublime [is] toward both a disintegration and a reintegration of self…toward both subjective incoherency and (transformed) subjective meaning" (183). In other words, the sublime, drawing here from Jean-Francois Lyotard, is an overwhelming sensory experience which defies our understanding of the normal forms and contours of the aesthetic object.[95] It defies words and feelings, yet through this, stretches our understanding of bodily and aesthetic form, thus functioning in such a way that it creates conditions for identity and coherency of self, but only through this initial moment of aesthetic unintelligibility. Thea Kronborg is most herself

[95] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 183-84.

– becoming the pinnacle of her own destiny – at the same performative instant where she exceeds herself while singing Sieglinde's final scene. The narrator describes it as, "That afternoon nothing new came to Thea Kronborg, no enlightenment, no inspiration. She merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long."[96] No more shame, no more doubt, only the intense and perfected execution of song and self. This performance also slyly gestures towards Thea's own queerness, as the role of Sieglinde is one painted by an incestuous romance, thus suggesting the diva's occupation of a space apart from traditional heterosexuality.[97] From shame blossoms a moment of possibility and self-making. Cather narrates the crowning performance of the novel as follows:

> Into one lovely attitude after another the music swept her, love impelled her. And the voice gave out all that was best in it. Like the spring, indeed, it blossomed into memories and prophecies, it recounted and it foretold, as she sang the story of her friendless life, and of how the thing which was truly herself, 'bright as the day, rose to the surface' when in the hostile world she for the first time beheld her Friend. [98]

This description of Thea's grand moment mirrors the possibilities in the sublime, of dissolution and reconstitution, recounting yet foretelling, being swept away yet giving all of oneself. And indeed, this is the moment of transformation for Thea. The sublime moment of performance allows her to go beyond the scope of herself, beyond the small, timid girl from Moonstone, Colorado. To Thea, we see here that 'the voice gave out all that was best,' and that her voice is the herald of springtime that blossoms with memories and prophecies—a narrative gesture that messily moves through time, space, and emotional attachments. The voice has always been the best of Thea. Here the voice indexes all of her old pains and pleasures, while also introducing a new version of Thea Kronborg that has eclipsed the old one. As Farmer maintains, "The diva is

[96] Cather, *The Song of the Lark,* 305.
[97] Lindemann, *Queering America*, 61.
[98] Cather, *The Song of the Lark,* 304.

nothing if not a consummate figure of self-authorization, a magisterial image of triumphant identifactory production."[99] Talent, it seems, being exceptional, lies at the ability to draw upon a well of formlessness and potential, a kind of queer energizing that allows us to move past bodily and affective limitations.

Thea transforms when she has reached the pinnacle of her success at the end of the novel. No longer is she the timid farm girl, but KRONBORG.[100] She speaks more, with more enthusiasm, more certainty. She has become dynamic, exceptional, a Diva. Likewise, as the shame that initially queered Thea fades, the queerness in those around her becomes more salient, more possible. The diva, acting as a kind of conduit of queerness, creates the situation by which queer recognition and identification can form. Sara Ahmed insists that "When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped." [101] This is precisely the kind of opportunity that diva performance in the twentieth century has allowed for—bodies tend to orbit around divas that are not normally supposed to touch and congregate. As Thea triumphantly ends her performance as Sieglinde, leaving the Metropolitan Opera, "A little crowd of people [were] lingering about the door – musicians from the orchestra who were waiting for their comrades, curious young men, and some poorly dressed girls who were hoping to get a glimpse of the singer" (306).[102] This is the moment, basking in the almost post-coital afterglow of diva performance, that queerness expands beyond Thea within the novel. The sublime on stage in Thea was a beacon that attracted queer identification with/to her. Cather codes 'curious young men,' and 'poorly dressed girls' who are so eager to see their diva at the

[99] Farmer, "The Fabulous Sublimity," 189.
[100] Pope and Leonardi point out that the last section of the novel, titled "Kronborg" is reminiscent of a name one might imagine placed high on the Marquee. See Pope and Leonardi, *The Diva's Mouth*, 104.
[101] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 165.
[102] Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, 306.

stage door as particular urban/working-class varieties of queer men and women.[103] They represent the possibilities for queer intimacies to congeal and form around divas.

The fact that Thea's triumphant performance is bookended with the emergence of questionably queer male bodies may raise some eyebrows. That is, on par with Sedgwick's classically configured triangulation of male homosocial desire, one might claim that Cather is treating the diva as a merely instrumental figure to the construction of male queerness within the novel. Similarly, even though the novel ends with a quick mention of Thea's marriage to Fred Ottenberg, readers may notice the budding friendship throughout the novel between Dr. Archie and Fred, ostensibly romantic rivals for Thea's affection. This would appear to play right into Sedgwick's argument that "the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle [is] … even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved."[104] In fact, in the final section of the novel, before Thea's performance as Sieglinde, and where Thea's presence is more scant due to her grueling rehearsal and performing schedule, we find Dr. Archie and Fred in almost romantic situations together. When they find themselves both in NYC, Fred invites Archie up to his hotel room for a late night meal and drinks, taking care to " 'let the waiter off at midnight.'"[105] And later on, the two gentlemen see a Saturday evening production of *Tannhauser* in each other's company, since Thea was preparing for a rehearsal.[106] Indeed, it is true that "the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men,"[107] and that Thea's training

[103] Terry Castle offers a useful reminder of "'sapphic' diva-worship," involving young women who would similarly swarm the stage door, vying for the attention of the diva. Castle specifically mentions the 'Gerry-Flappers' who regularly waited for Geraldine Farrar. See Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 206.
[104] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 21.
[105] Cather, *The Song of the Lark,* 266.
[106] Cather, *The Song of the Lark,* 277.
[107] Sedgwick, *Between Men,* 25.

and success is at least partly credited to the patronage and emotional support of Fred and Archie. This are all fair enough points toward Sedgwick's claim, and I can't deny that Cather seems to nod more and more towards the queerness in male bodies at the end of the novel, yet this is not at the expense of Thea. She herself remains queer throughout. Nowhere in the novel does the potential queerness of Archie and Fred's friendship, or the 'curious young men' waiting to see her outside the Metropolitan Opera, eclipse Thea. Cather meticulously built Thea's life into that of an artist, so that she might become a diva who effects change, stirs intimacies and queer friendships in those around her. Thus, within *The Song of the Lark*, there is a sense that Thea is in control of this erotic triangulation, where she endlessly defers the erotics of her suitors, supporters, or fans, only stirring it into a frenzy when she sings the part of Sieglinde—so that she may truly become a diva, the artist of Cather's vision.

Given that this performance of Sieglinde remains so significant in understanding Thea, what remains unusual among Cather's buildup of her rise into success is the scant amount of time—barely 3 pages—actually spent on the defining performance of the whole novel. This is partly indicative of Cather's tendency to value the minutia of interiority over the grandness of spectacular happenings. Nonetheless, Cather's vision of Thea Kronborg as diva within *The Song of the Lark* follows Koestenbaum's thesis of opera as a journey of the voice.[108] That is, Cather is describing in minute detail every seemingly minor encounter and experience that allows a diva to rise from a small-town and become something larger-than-life. This speaks to a more generative understanding of divas, one that allows us to see them as figures connected to the margins, where the voice becomes the resonance of difference.[109]

[108] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 155.
[109] This is an elaboration on Roland Barthes's argument that "Listening to the voice inaugurates the relation to the Other." See Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms,* 254.

After the Encore: The Limits of Opera

Though Cather's work in establishing a cultural model—through fiction—of the influence and effect that divas have is paramount, this importance needs to be measured alongside broader considerations about how race is treated or abandoned within *The Song of the Lark*. While Cather is building divas up in such a way that they become queer cultural forces to be reckoned with, there are gaps in her model. Lindemann argues that, "…the subversive, celebratory mood of *The Song of the Lark*, is at times undercut by signs of dis-ease and anxiety about the security of white racial power and civilization."[110] Lindemann sees Cather as being *aware* of race and racism, but constructs her characters in ambivalent relationships to these conversations and to the (few) characters of color within the novel.[111] We see Cather's cavalier treatment of race clearly in Thea Kronborg's time spent in Panther Canyon in the American Southwest, among the 'Ancient People,' where she was able to recharge, recollect, and gather her strength to eventually become the great diva KRONBORG. Much of this episode relies on the romanticization of indigenous bodies/spaces as 'mystical,' where white bodies can cathect their fantasies of self-exploration onto. What are the automatic, invisible assumptions in Cather's model of divadom? For Cather, who gets to be a diva? What's at stake in Cather affirming and assuming the grandiosity of whiteness in opera divas like Thea Kronborg or the real-life Olive Fremstad? I appreciate the detail of Cather's model for female artistry in the diva, but I also want to extend her model. For if the sublime moments that divas evoke are truly about possibility and embodiment, then we must think about the other possible bodies beyond the white opera singer that qualify as divas in the same historical moment.

[110] Lindemann, *Queering America*, 60.
[111] Lindemann, *Queering America*, 60.

In this section of my chapter, I contend that opera or classical music could never have been the primary cultural vessel by which black subjects pursued and encountered the queer sublime in diva performance. We see how this exclusion plays out in W.E.B DuBois's seminal work, the 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*. Amidst his larger project detailing his theories of race and the experiences of African Americans in the United States, we find a fictional parable, "Of the Coming of John." I turn to a passage from this parable to show how race is often experienced sonically in the American cultural terrain. Likewise, I want to use this example to show how the limitations of. In this parable, we see a young John Jones shuffled into an opera hall one day, unwittingly beside a white childhood friend and his date, whose seat he inadvertently is placed in. While his white childhood playmate is seething with rage at being in the proximity of a black body, John is drinking in the decadent aesthetics of Wagner and the opera hall. The sublime washed over him,

> for he sat in a half-amaze minding the scene about him; the delicate beauty of the hall, the faint perfume, the moving myriad of men, the rich clothing … seemed all a part of a world so different from his, so strangely more beautiful than anything he had known, … and started when, after a hush, rose high and clear the music of Lohengrin's swan. The infinite beauty of the wail lingered and swept through every muscle of his frame, and put it all a-tune. … A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If he could only live up in the free air where birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood! Who had called him to the be the slave and butt of all? [112]

John's encounter with Wagner elicits a response in him that is no different from those in the audience at Thea Kronborg's performance in *Die Walkure*—he is enraptured, brought to that sublime moment of possibility and suggestion. What is different here, though, is the direction in which the sublime moves John. He does not merely feel the ecstasy or grandiosity of the performance and the theatrics, he feels compelled and stirred. The sublime is always rhetorical,

[112] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1961 [1903]), 172.

pushing us to do something or feel something that we might otherwise be disinclined to do.[113] This sublime moment leads him to contemplate freedom, as that 'deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise,' and to 'live up in the free air,' beyond his current life of labor and struggle. Similarly, the final sentence in this passage is a question, with John asking why he, a black man, must still bear the burden of slavery years hence. The sublime brought by the opera here gestures towards freedom, but withholds it, makes it inaccessible to John, but it also marks the moment where John's attitude and awareness of his own blackness becomes most salient. With all this in mind, what is the sublime's relationship to freedom? And, how can the sublime act in the service of blackness, if the opera hall excludes it? Where, then, are black subjects to find the sublime, if the opera hall casts a pall of judgment over them? Though there is no diva depicted in the above passage, I turn to diva performance and its afterlife to think through these questions in the early-twentieth century.

'Do You Remember Ma Rainey?'

Langston Hughes, in a 1952 article published in the influential black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, titled "If You Remember These Things Gimme Five," goes through a charmingly nostalgic list of world happenings, habits, ways of living, and political gossip of days gone by, all of which are presented as questions, each line asking "Do you remember…?". Hughes ends this article with the line, "If you do, then you are as old as me! Yes, you are!" The penultimate line, though, is "Do you remember Ma Rainey?" Each other line is given a little bit of context, such as "Do you remember when Louis Armstrong first came North?", or "Do you remember when nobody ever heard 'The St. Louis Blus'?", but the line nearest to the end only

[113] See Kant, *Critique*, 134.

asks "Do you remember Ma Rainey?"[114] Hughes doesn't ask his reader to remember what she did or where she traveled, but instead asks his reader to remember her larger-than-life legend, as though her deeds go without saying, as though her name evokes something grand and recognizable. I want to answer Hughes's question with a resounding "Yes!" because remembering 'Ma' Rainey helps us to establish the genealogical line where we find a model for divas that move away from classical music and opera, thus allowing for the sound and voice of blackness to emerge. Remembering 'Ma' Rainey in a genealogy of divas tells us not that she was ever forgotten, but rather insists that we look at how the twentieth century is the moment when black divas like Rainey were using the cultural forms, products, and traditions at their disposal to sculpt stage personas and augment their voices in order to create a powerfully parallel trajectory of divas when compared to their whiter, operatic counterparts. I mark the emergence and proliferation of the blues as a crucially important performative moment for understanding how the sublime on stage can perform cultural work in the service of queer forms of blackness.

Within this emergence of the blues, I cite Gertrude "Ma" Rainey as a crucial and important herald. Born Gertrude Pridgett in 1886, in Columbus, Georgia, Rainey gravitated towards the blues and singing at a young age, eventually joining a touring minstrel show with her husband, William 'Pa' Rainey. It was in this minstrel and vaudeville tradition that Rainey became seasoned as a performer throughout the South, performing not only the blues, but comedy, dance, and other acts which follow the vaudeville/variety show format, billing herself as 'Madame Gertrude Rainey.' As the blues became more popular in the early 1910s, so too did Rainey, and it was during this period that Rainey worked with, perhaps mentored, and likely was a lover of Bessie Smith, who was several years her junior. Rainey signed to the Paramount

[114] See Langston Hughes, "If You Remember These Things Then Gimme Five," *The Chicago Defender*, Feb 9, 1952. 10.

Record Company as a recording artist in 1923, and it was through the abundant enthusiasm in the advertisements for these records that Rainey earned her title, the "Mother of the Blues." She recorded with Paramount through 1928, experiencing immense popularity and a gradual decline in her career as she approached the early 1930s, particularly as a result of the Great Depression, the proliferation of cinema, and the changing musical tastes of the generation.[115] Throughout this prolific career, I'm claiming that Rainey's theatrical and affective stage performances, the print history that accompanied her success at selling records, and the literary legacies she inspired as an icon of an era all strongly convince me that she is the *best* model for how divas in the twentieth century moved away from opera and classical music while still maintaining that sublime pull that drew queer and/or black audiences towards them.[116]

In her influential essay "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," Hazel Carby, reasons that focusing on the blues performances of women in the early twentieth century gives us access to a discursive space that was always about race, gender, sexuality, and the push and pull between structures of power and the fight for representation.[117]

---

[115] These biographical details are synthesized from Sandra Lieb's biography of Rainey. See Sandra R. Lieb. *Mother of The Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 1-48.

[116] I belabor this point if only because Daphne Brooks's exceptionally detailed *Bodies in Dissent* offers an alternative starting point for thinking about how divas were built within the 20th century. She turns to Pauline Hopkins's 1902-1903 novel *Of One Blood*, and centers her discussion on the character of Dianthe Lusk, part of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Her analysis of Lusk does offer an earlier model for thinking about racialized divas in the fiction of the 20th century, and it likewise does include detailed passages focusing on vocal performance and a sensory overload that could be easily read as sublime. These discussions are insightful and incredibly rigorous. However, starting with Rainey instead of Hopkins and the character of Dianthe Lusk and/or the historical Fisk Jubilee Sisters gives me the opportunity to point to the convergence of queerness and race *through the blues* as the most important shift in 20th century divadom. As I will continue to discuss in this chapter, the recording technologies that Rainey aligned her career with materialized queerness and blackness in ways that more recognizably model the divas of the 20th century. And lastly, the character of Lusk was a tragic figure within the structure of a novel which ostensibly focused on a white passing doctor Reuel Briggs. So, in some ways, it does not precisely follow the trend in the literature of Cather or even Wilson, Jones, and Walker to give the diva a position of influence, i.e. 'center-stage' within the novel. See Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 284-324.

[117] Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Edited by Robert G. O'Meally, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 474.

Carby draws attention to the importance of the blues singer as an icon with a representational legacy, offering that

> A variety of narratives, both fictional and biographical, have mythologized the woman blues singer, and these become texts about sexuality. Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects…. The figure of the woman blues singer has become a cultural embodiment of social and sexual conflict, from Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private and into the public… For these singers were gorgeous, and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.[118]

I cite this passage at length because of how clearly it establishes the framework I intend to build upon to discuss Rainey's influence and legacy as a queer blues diva in the early twentieth century. Though Carby does not use the word 'diva' in her essay, I contend that the focus and cultural importance that she attaches to the figure of the blues singer is such that she is basically granting them diva-status, noting their 'mythologized' air, and the 'privileged space' they occupy within twentieth century culture. Neither does Carby use the word 'queer' in her above description,[119] but the way she describes such blues singers as 'liminal figures' who concern themselves with sexual possibilities sings resoundingly queer in hindsight. At the risk of sounding anachronistic, it appears that Carby, rightfully so, noticed much that is queer about divas, and the blues. Thinking of divas and the blues this way lets us see that queerness saturates

[118] Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way," 474, 481.
[119] Carby's essay was published in 1986, several years before the term 'queer' was introduced into academic parlance in the early 1990s.

the roots of the blues. [120] Carby builds the power of the female blues performer through a gesture to their physicality, to the way that divas wear and perform the body on stage. And she does not negate or diminish the importance of accoutrement or aestheticization in her discussion here, instead arguing that "the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body" are part and parcel of the process by which divas build their spectacular power.[121] Curiously, Carby also does not mention Rainey, the "Mother of the Blues," only Bessie Smith, its "Empress." Yet I choose to focus on Rainey, not because she was the first or best blues singer who could be considered a diva, but rather to illustrate how she helped to form the contours of queerness—particularly as this queerness was connected to the black experience in the early twentieth century. [122]

Pieces of the Blues – Ma's Print Life

In his early study of Ma Rainey and other blues singers, Derrick Stewart-Baxter mourns the historical circumstances that allowed singers like Rainey and Bessie Smith to be revered and remembered while other contemporaries of theirs have gone forgotten. While Stewart-Baxter attributes the success and endurance of Rainey's and Smith's sound to their "universal and timeless message that came from the very root of the blues," [123] I might add that the emergent recording technologies of the time carried a great part in how Rainey and Smith are remembered

[120] Lieb's biography of Rainey explains how some New York audiences gave her a lukewarm response in the early-to-mid 1920s, saying that she performed 'queer music.' Given how urban gay scenes were beginning to use 'queer' in their regular parlance, it's entirely possible that the response to Rainey's music in NYC was also a reaction to the overt references to same-sex desire in her lyrics and stage visuals. See Lieb, *The Mother of the Blues,* 32; *George* Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, And the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 15-16.
[121] Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way," 474, 481.
[122] Mamie Smith was the first African American blues singer to record music in 1920. See Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and The Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 12.
[123] Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers*, 97-99.

as great legends of the classic blues era.[124] Rainey's extreme success as a recording artist, in addition to her substantial career as a touring singer and musician, is especially noteworthy when compared to how operatic divas fared far less successfully with their vocal recordings in the same time period.[125] Beyond these emerging technologies, though, the print publications from the black press, particularly *The Chicago Defender*, were crucial in constructing an image of black stardom in Rainey. The readership of *T*he *Chicago Defender* went beyond the city limits of Chicago, circulating throughout the Midwest and both large and small southern towns,[126] Rainey's success was produced by a combined effort from the black press, black audiences who purchased her records, and Paramount record studios, who began producing 'race records' in the early 1920s. As the *Defender* was a platform by which African Americans in the early twentieth century Great Migration-era might imagine themselves to be part of American life and prosperity,[127] it is not insignificant to point out that the *Defender's* construction of Rainey as a blues star is coterminous with a construction of an optimistic idea of what black life might be in the US.[128] What the print records of Rainey's traveling career reveal is that her career was

[124] Sandra Lieb's biography of Rainey points out that although both Rainey and Bessie Smith experienced immense success as recording artists, Rainey's label, Paramount, was smaller, regionally based in the Midwest, and went bankrupt in the early 1930s. Lieb's point is that such circumstances helped Smith supersede Rainey's reputation and legacy within the history of blues, as her recordings were often easier to acquire, as well. See Lieb, *The Mother of the Blues,* xii-xiii.

[125] Regarding Olive Fremstad's foray into recording, Goldberg notes that "No one has ever been very happy with the fifteen selections Fremstad recorded, starting with the diva herself …." The fact that Fremstad is still remembered, though, is in no small part due to *The Song of the Lark*, which suggests that divas' legacies go beyond the simple remembrance of their voice. The fact, though, that Fremstad's voice never quite translated into record form suggest something about how diva performance, and the sublime larger-than-lifeness felt during it, is never *only* about the voice, but is also about the staging and apparatus that constructs the diva to-be as sublime and larger than life through her voice and body. See Goldberg, *Cather and Others*, 79.

[126] A.D. DeSantis, "Selling the American Dream Myth to black southerners: The Chicago Defender and the great migration of 1915-1919," (1998) *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 478.

[127] DeSantis, "Selling the American Dream," 476.

[128] Erin Chapman has a somewhat less positive reading of the historiography regarding Rainey and other women performers of the 1920s, and convincingly claims that the moment the cultural industry started to promote and construct images of black stardom was the same moment that such women entered what she calls the 'sex-race marketplace.' Indeed, Chapman doesn't see Rainey so much as a progenitor for thinking about black queerness in the 20th century through her music but argues that Rainey's work "ultimately failed to declare her emancipation

peppered throughout the south and Midwest, while she often stayed in Chicago to record or begin extensive tours. She seldom performed in Harlem or other parts of NYC, unless she happened to be in the city for a recording.[129] These details make Rainey an important exception in my genealogy of divas; namely, that Rainey's diva status and her performances that I discuss are not intimately connected to the urban life of New York City and the queer cultures or performance institutions laid within.[130] It also asks us to remember that divas are not *always* products of the urban, if they record, perform, or find their training in urban centers. Divas can perform from and to 'the country.' Even though Rainey performed often in large cities throughout the Midwest, her touring schedule often stopped through smaller or medium-sized towns, suggesting that to Rainey, 'making it' in NYC was never the pinnacle of success. Even if Chicago and St. Louis were major blues music hubs in which she performed, Rainey's performative ethos was one that never strayed too far from her rural, folk roots. This gestures towards the fact that queerness does not always express itself through cosmopolitanism, and that urban enclaves are not prerequisites for finding queerness.

The *Chicago Defender* helped to establish in its readership a sense of 'Ma' Rainey's performative presence or ethos as a diva; even if you never purchased a record of hers, because Rainey's career was heavily advertised, especially between 1923 and 1928 when she was actively recording. The visuals accompanying the advertisements were cartoonish drawings of

---

but instead confined her in the grips of salacious, primitivist immorality and deviance." See Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, And Popular Culture in The 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.

[129] *The Chicago Defender* make frequent note of her performances and travels throughout the Midwest and South, so her lack of time spent in New York is deduced from the scant mention of such appointments in the *Defender*. See "Ma In Gotham," *The Chicago Defender*, Oct. 18, 1924. 7. Also see Angela Yvonne Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, And Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 139.

[130] George Chauncey notes, though, in his seminal *Gay New York*, that Ma Rainey and other queer blues figures were still enormously popular among the gay black working class in New York, who oftentimes found little in common with the cultural endeavors of the Harlem intelligentsia during the same period. See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 250-251.

Rainey, which were occasionally charming, othertimes they relied on racist imagery.[131] Here the diva didn't exist in portraiture, but rather caricature, sometimes joyously, sometimes queerly. One need only look at the Paramount advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for her famous 1928 'Prove It On Me Blues,' which features a suspicious policeman in the background, eyeing up a sharply dressed Rainey who appears to be flirting with two young, attractive, and fashionable women (figure 1). The text of this advertisement is deliberately unclear, stating only "What's all this? Scandal? Maybe so, but you wouldn't have thought it of 'Ma' Rainey," leaving a reader to wonder what this 'it' the audience is supposed to not suspect Rainey of doing. The subtext displayed in the advertisement gives way to a much clearer message in the lyrics of the song which explicity reference her taste for women.[132]

[131] Even though the emergent recording technologies at the beginning of the 20th century offered a chance for black subjectivity to materialize and endure through song and voice, the process was not wholly liberatory. All too often, the advertisements that accompanied early blues legends like Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith relied on racist caricatures of black women—in image and text—to sell records. See Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and The Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press. 2014), 45-46.

[132] See *Chicago Defender*, "Prove It On Me Blues," Sept 22, 1928, pg 7, and Lieb, *The Mother of the Blues*, 124.

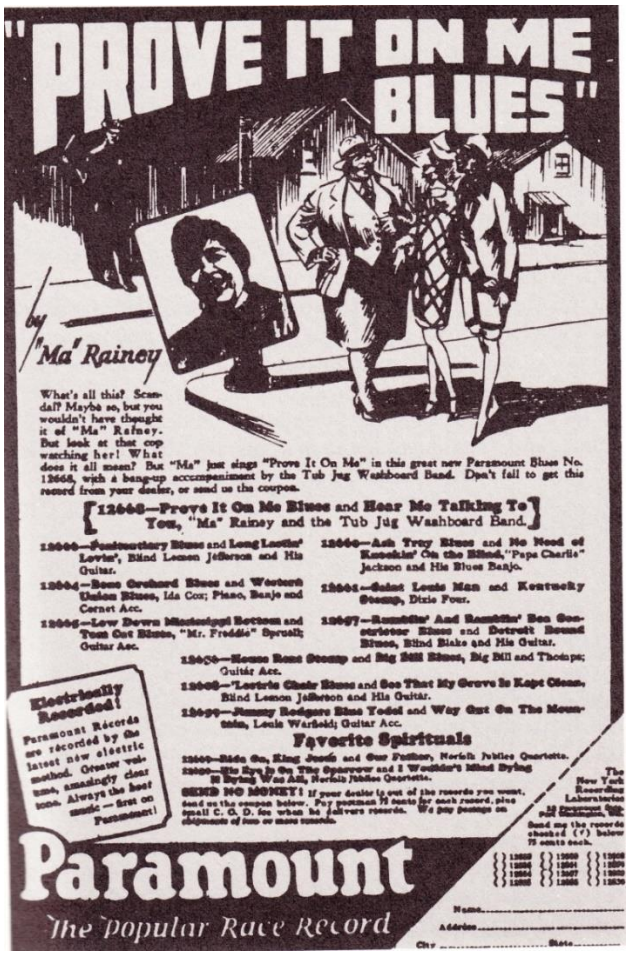


Figure 2 - "Prove It on Me Blues," The Chicago Defender, 22 September 1928, pg 7.

The song famously declares "Say I do it, ain't nobody caught me, // Sure got to prove it on me; // I went out last night with a crowd of my friends, // They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men."[133] This presentation of Rainey in both the lyrics and advertisement of "Prove It on Me Blues" gives us glimpses of the attitude we come to expect in contemporary divas: playfulness, defiance, and sexual assertiveness. It is significant to note here that the first highly successful black recording artist is a blues singer who sang about queer experiences in her own music. Rainey's queerness remained legible for audiences, readers, or listeners at the time, as it still does today.

[133] Lieb, *The Mother of the Blues*, 124.

In an extended discussion of Rainey, we must remember the massive influence of vaudeville and touring performance companies and theater collectives like the Theater Owners' Booking Agency (T.O.B.A.) in building a cultural significance and attachment to divas, particularly in rural black communities in the early twentieth century.[134] Stewart-Baxter tells us, as does Koko Taylor, interviewed in the documentary film *Wild Women Don't Have the Blues*, informs the viewer that the blues of Ma Rainey were always primarily connected, and rose out of, Vaudevillian performance communities associated with the South.[135] Stewart-Baxter insists that "With Ma Rainey came the sounds of the South, the blues of the field workers (or their later derivatives), the songs of the wandering musicians and the ballads of the tent and minstrel shows."[136] In this, the blues always carries a sense of the rural in it. Even if its music travels to, or is heard in cities, the blues is firmly rooted in a real or imagined rural experience of black folk. This is particularly significant in regards to 'Ma' Rainey as a blues diva because it again reiterates that divas are *not solely* icons or figures that reside within the grand opera halls of the urban.

Unfortunately, the details of Rainey's performances are somewhat scarce, as there is little visual documentation and no surviving viewers, which creates a challenge when trying to discuss or provide an analysis of Rainey's stage presence. Most of the existing reviews of her performances are effusive in their praise, but don't always reveal the specifics of her shows and performative strategies. don't say much about the specifics of each performance except that she was loved. We do know, however, that she had a penchant for theatrics (perhaps inspired by her

[134] T.O.B.A. produced mostly black vaudeville acts from 1907 onward. There were occasionally shows specifically for white audiences, but most of T.O.B.A.'s shows were produced with black audiences in mind. T.O.B.A. had theaters in both large and small cities across the south and Midwest. See Lieb, *The Mother of the Blues*, 27.
[135] Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers, 35*. See also *Christine Dall, dir. Wild Women Don't Have the Blues. Calliope Film Resources, 1989. VHS.*
[136] Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers, 35*.

roots in Vaudeville), frequently opening her sets emerging from a large set-piece Victrola.[137] Even with this relative scarcity of performance details, our understanding of Rainey's *impact* is not lost. If we turn to Sterling Brown's famous poem, 'Ma Rainey,' though, we get a historical resonance of a different kind, an example of the profound affective trace that divas leave behind, of feelings being archived in the cultural, to borrow from Cvetkovich.[138] Brown writes "O Ma Rainey, // Sing yo' song; // Now you's back // Whah you belong, // Git way inside us, // Keep us strong. . . ."[139] which intimates an intrusiveness of divas, that they 'stick' with us as they 'Git way inside.' Such intrusions into ourselves are a source of vitality that 'keep us strong,' implying that when divas like Rainey are back 'Whah you belong,' they clarify and articulate the intangible affects of struggle and survival. Brown's poem honoring Rainey speaks to the lingering legacy of divas, that even in memory, divas provide for those who seek in them a model of resilience. It is through following these feelings of impact and vitality that I will configure a sense of what Rainey's brand of diva felt like, piecing together her own performance career alongside the literary works that she inspired.

Ma's Legends, Legacies, and Literary lives

Rainey's honorific title, the "Mother of the Blues" also tells us that she has a heritage, a progeny, of queer performance that comes after her (not least of all Bessie Smith, who is often cited as Rainey's most direct performative 'lineage'). Importantly, though, part of this progeny is changing the conceptualization of what a diva could be, look like, what affects she could sing, and in which cultural circles she could perform. To understand the extent of Rainey's influence,

[137] See Chas O'Neal, "In Old Kay See," *The Chicago Defender,* July 18, 1925. 6.
[138] Cvetkovich might also say that such a process is a uniquely *queer* process of archiving. See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 242
[139] Sterling A. Brown, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (Chicago: TriQuarterly Books, 1989), 62-63.

and the legacy she has left, we need only look to the African American literary traditions of the later twentieth century that represented her directly, or more generally engaged with the figure of the blues diva.

These literary interpretations of Rainey explore Rainey's legacy as not *solely* connected to a series of successful recordings, but also connected to an ambitious life on stage, as well. Per Jessica Teague, this is the main conceptual tension that drives August Wilson's 1981 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In her article discussing Wilson's play, "The Recording Studio on Stage, Liveness in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Teague argues that Wilson's play exemplifies the tension between live performance and recorded sounds in the construction of Rainey's story.[140] Teague reminds us that even though there are extensive and reliable recordings of Jazz and the Blues, that we should not wholly associate these musical forms with these recordings, thereby erasing the crucial dimension of Blues and Jazz that relied on live performance and stage production.[141] Indeed, for as much fame as her recordings brought her, the Rainey of Wilson's play is deeply suspicious of (yet strategic in her dealings with) record executives who don't so much care about her reputation as a performer deserving of respect, as she represents a profit to be made. She famously states in the play "They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. … As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on."[142] Thus within Wilson's play, Rainey is imagined as a figure who thinks of herself *primarily* as a live performer, and only incidentally or pragmatically a recording artist. Teague similarly asserts that Rainey, "as one

[140] J. E. Teague, "The Recording Studio on Stage: Liveness in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 555.
[141] J. E. Teague, "The Recording Studio on Stage," 555.
[142] Wilson, 79.

who grew up in vaudeville and only later made the transition to a recording career, Rainey has a conception of the music that privileges live performance."[143] Even so, it is this moment in the play that Rainey realizes that her recorded voice is the fulcrum by which she can exert pressure and demands on a white execute class. And, it is the same moment where a white execute class can threaten, demand, and curse a diva like Rainey, "calling me all kinds of names … calling me everything but a child of god."[144] Thus Rainey's biggest gripe here in Wilson's play is not the recording industry herself, but that the white executives and managers who run it don't care about her life, her reputation, her story, and certainly not her experience of race. Teague again claims that *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* revolves around a negotiated presence and absence that concerns blackness, the blues, and Ma Rainey herself.[145] This is a useful reminder to *always* think about divas as figures of presence and absence, live and recorded, spectral yet physically felt. By thinking of divas this way, the stakes surrounding a genealogy of divas unfold: queerness and race become present, materialized, while still maintaining the ethereal and affective traces that waft from them.

This negotiation between presence and absence in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* can perhaps be understood as a question of ontological standing. That is, how often is blackness constantly negotiating its ability to simply *be*? Rainey's character within Wilson's play seems painfully aware of both her role, and the role of the blues in addressing these ontological concerns. Rainey knows she is situated within a tradition of blues, and does not see herself as its progenitor, even though her grand appellation might suggest otherwise. She muses that, "I ain't started the blues way of singing. The blues always been here….They say I started it … but I didn't. I just helped it

[143] Teague, "The Recording Studio on Stage," 559
[144] Wilson, 79.
[145] Teague, "The Recording Studio on Stage," 568.

out. Filled up that empty space a little bit. That's all. But if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that's all right with me…"[146] Within this very passage we see the *presence* of the blues as having 'always been here' positioned against Rainey's desire to use the blues to fill the *absence* of 'that empty space a little bit.' This is at the same moment that Rainey asserts her comfort with the title of 'Mother of the Blues' given to her.

If we read these passages in conversation with Fred Moten's important treatise on blackness, improvisation, and the avant-garde, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, we see how 'Ma' Rainey negotiates the precarity of black ontology through a performance of the sublime. Moten, in thinking of black subjects as objects that resist, who form their subjectivity through a resistance to the objecthood of slavery, states, "the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness…is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*."[147] Thus, in the conditions of slavery, where one is commodified, relegated to objecthood, black subjects experience maternity as an avenue for animation and reproduction—for possibility.[148] Importantly, the story of Wilson's play about Rainey inscribes for us a maternal figure, who, in negotiating her own position as a commodity of the recording industry, contemplates the presence and absence of not herself, but blackness itself. The emptiness that Rainey speaks of matter-of-factly is the psychic condition of feeling-as-object, being commodity, not being. The blues is not merely a panacea to these feelings. It is rather the only way by which Rainey can fill these experience of blackness, where emptiness gives way to abundance. Per Moten, the ontology of blackness might be found in this feeling of absence, or in the 'break,' but that gap or caesura is not empty. This is the fold that inscribes an

[146] Wilson, 83.
[147] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 16.
[148] Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

improvisatory aurality to visuality and vice versa, and the way that blackness gains its own ontological weight.[149] This caesura is the sublime, the aesthetic or affective moment of formlessness that breaks the boundaries of what we know and perceive only to reform and reimagine the extent of those ontological borders. Through this, blackness and queerness become possible. Just like how Thea Kronborg's evocation of the sublime opened the possibility for queer pleasures and intimacies to perform, so too does 'Ma' Rainey's own sublime create the conditions for a queer blackness through sensation, pleasure, and improvisation.

This is the same dynamic through which Alice Walker explores the role of the blues singer as diva in her classic novel, *The Color Purple;* that is, in the design of Shug Avery, Davis shows us how divas exert a series of sensory and performative changes within culture or a community. In similar ways to how Cather has painted her heroine Thea Kronborg as a diva whose talents consistently brought her certain forms of social isolation, Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, claims that Walker's diva Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* likewise experiences such ostracization that coincides with her success and identity as a diva. In fact, as Shug Avery enters Celie's world, and slowly begins performing at Harpo's juke joint, not only is Shug's own difference from those around her a signal of her queerness, but it is through Shug—as diva—that Celie's own same sex desires awaken. As Celie obsequiously primps Shug in preparation for one of her shows at Harpo's, Celie's voice begins to articulate her own desires for Shug, musing that "At least I git to see Shug Avery work. I git to watch her. I git to hear her. … I look at Shug and my heart begin to cramp. … He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug."[150] Davis relatedly implies that though the blues singer-cum-diva inspires important awakenings and developments in Celie and others within the novel, there is a sense that the diva

[149] Moten, *In the Break*, 202.
[150] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 76-77.

can never *truly* be assimilated into proper heterosexual society.[151] Following this line of thought, I argue that the diva's queerness always outs herself. Shug and Celie may have had quasi queer interactions before, when Celie was nursing Shug back to health: massaging her, combing her hair, interactions drenched in same-sex touching and care. But, it was only upon seeing and hearing Shug perform on stage that Celie's own queerness begins to be articulated, even if Shug's is somewhat omnipresent. Celie's experience above is one immersed in the sensorial and the affective, she watches, hears, feels a desirous pain upon seeing Shug perform and realizing that she does not have her. Indeed, diva worship is an experience of immersion, closeness to the diva is pleasure, but almost pain, as well. Walker is here reminding us that lesbian desires and identifications can bloom out of the experience of diva worship, that the pursuit of divas is not squarely in the realm of gay men.

The blues are the method by which Shug is able to hold such performative power to anneal and forge a queer recognition in those around her. When Shug is trying to convince Squeak to sing, perhaps as a way for her to 'find her voice,' Squeak is initially hesitant, and sees nothing in the diva-esque figure of Shug that she can relate to. Shug describes the blues and singing to Squeak in terms that she can understand, even if they elicit a blush. "I tell you something else, Shug say to Mary Agnes, listening to you sing, folks git to thinking bout a good screw. Aw, *Miss Shug*, say Mary Agnes, changing color. Shug say, What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together? She laugh. That's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music. Devils love to fuck."[152] Shug's understanding of the blues, and the diva's role in singing it, is one that is unequivocally rooted in the body. Divas dance, fuck, sing, and perform songs about it, too. This, of course, puts divas at odds with the religious communities

[151] See Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 120-137.
[152] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 120.

that condemn such embodied activities. In Davis's analysis, there is a tension described between the pleasure-filled revelry that divas bring, and the strict dictates of the church that seek to restrain such pleasure—and many emerging forms of queerness. However, she goes on to state that this 'bad girl' identity that such a relationship to the church brings actually offers some important freedoms in performing gender and sexuality outside of normative Christian doctrine.[153] This 'bad girl' performance of the blues also put blues performers like the fictional Shug and the historical 'Ma' Rainey outside of black respectability and out of favor with many black intellectuals, too much resembling the 'folk' culture of African Americans that was deemed too 'country,' too 'primitive,' or too working class.[154]

The Blues Spectacle: Begetting Blackness

Though I earlier stated that there were few vivid performance descriptions of Rainey's work, the ones that do exist tend to emphasize her signature entrance involving a large Victrola/record player on stage. In Lerone Martin's description of Rainey performing, we can feel the enormity of her stage presence as that which is soaked in vaudevillian influences, but with the emotional tenor of the blues, which in turn produces a sublime moment that is no less profound than the kind produced on stage at the Metropolitan Opera. Martin describes the performance as follows,

> Rainey began the infamous performance inside a life-size phonograph. A chorus girl would stroll across the stage, place a makeshift record on the 'big Paramount Talking Machine,' and then crank the handle, signaling the band to begin playing. On cue, a harmonizing Rainey emerged from the oversized phonograph, singing 'Moonshine Blues,' adorned in her notorious bejeweled gown that weighed up to twenty pounds, gold plated teeth, and a necklace of twenty-dollar gold pieces. As the spotlight hit her, Ma

[153] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 120-137.
[154] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 42-44, 123.

> glistened and bellowed, 'I've been drinking all night, babe, and the night before…' The performance left the audience spellbound every time. …[155]

Rainey's entrance here is both spectacular and potentially campy in using a giant constructed phonograph, which cleverly reveals how enmeshed Rainey's star power was to the power of the phonograph and recording technologies. But we also see how Rainey's version of divadom was as reliant on visual aesthetics in the stage production as it was on sonic reverberations. This entrance was also redolent with queer sexual subtexts, as it is a chorus girl who 'starts her up' by 'cranking her handle,' clearly playing with Rainey's reputation for seeking feminine desire with a ham-fisted stage visual. Here the entrance of the diva already signals queer pleasure. This entrance has all the trappings of the sublime, a wave-like deluge of sensory or aesthetic stimulation that overwhelms the view, drawing them close to the sublime object or feeling.[156] Martin's account of Rainey here suggests that her performances functioned in this way, leaving audiences 'spellbound,' inspiring fandom and devotion, but most importantly, a different model for how blackness could be lived and felt outside of the dictates of Protestant respectability (and its concurrent heterosexuality) and racial uplift.[157] Rainey's effect on her audience might be described as one of enchantment, and the effect she left on Sterling Brown was no different. Brown described her as follows: "Ma Rainey was a tremendous figure. She wouldn't have to sing any words; she would moan, and the audience would moan with her. She had them in the palm of her hand. I heard Bessie Smith also, but Ma Rainey was the greatest mistress of an audience. Bessie was the greater blues singer, but Ma really *knew* these people; she was a person

[155] Martin, *Preaching on Wax,* 58.
[156] While I can't definitively claim that Rainey established the trope of popular musical divas making grand entrances, it is certainly worth noting that divas throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century have developed more and more creative ways to emerge from the stage or enter from the ceiling. Almost 100 years after Rainey's heyday, Kylie Minogue continues this tradition by rising from the stage on a golden seashell as the goddess Aphrodite. See chapter 3 of this dissertation.
[157] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 58.

of the folk…"[158] Brown's assessment of Rainey as a 'person of the folk' is a gesture towards thinking about the shift in divas at this historical moment. And, as Martin continued to explain in his aforementioned performance description, that Rainey, 'Whether performing in the black metropolis of Chicago or the towns of the deep south,' was bringing to 'African-Americans … new form[s] of commercial recreation and entertainment that praised gaudy adornment, conspicuous consumption, sexual explicitness, folk expression.'[159] In other words, Rainey brought the figure of the diva to black communities across large swaths of the country. That 'Ma' Rainey can ensnare an audience with her whoops and moans in a similar way that the fictional Thea Kronborg can with her fastidious operatic arias tells us that minoritized communities produce their own divas apart from the apparatus of opera and classical music. Black communities in the early twentieth century were more interested in divas like 'Ma' Rainey, who would always be a diva singing about the struggles and experiences of black folk *for* other black folk.

I want to end this discussion on Rainey by pointing our attention to Gayl Jones's novel, *Corregidora*, where we also find the figure of the blues singer (albeit not Rainey), repeatedly articulating throughout the novel what her relationship is to the blues, which also pivots on a negotiation of presence and absence. Though we get frequent insight into her actions and thoughts, the main character, Ursa, often struggles to find the words to speak clearly, loudly, and with conviction. When Ursa is simply asked "*What do blues do for you?*" she responds, "It helps me to explain what I can't explain."[160] To Ursa, her experience of blackness is one of trauma. How does one give voice to an inherited experience of trauma? Later in the novel Ursa asks her

[158] Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers*, 42.
[159] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 58.
[160] Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 56.

mother "*Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you'd see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes."*[161] Jones illustrates the fact that the blues is able to communicate the experience of blackness in a different way. That a song, or a moan, or a gesture can access knowledge and affects of belonging. Ursa tries to explain what is 'behind the words,' as 'what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes.' Therefore, singing the blues is a way to access the pains and traumas of blackness without speaking them.

The blues, as explained by Houston A. Baker, is a black discursive strategy that communicates shared pains, pleasures, common experiences. Baker explains how the blues index "fields burning under torpid Southern suns, or lands desolately drenched by too high rivers." And that "The intended audience is black people themselves defined by the very blues tones and lyrics as sharers in a nation of common concern and culturally specific voice."[162] Baker's understanding of the blues is a continued emergence of black voices that offer models for survival and prosperity which are drawn from the experiences of black folk. In many ways Rainey epitomizes Baker's model, creating a discursive and sensorial terrain of blackness, but also queerness, in her performance of the blues.

The tale of two divas, then, is a complex one. Though the figure of the diva herself is centuries old, the early-twentieth century is a unique moment in the story of the diva. The worlds that created the fictional Thea Kronborg and the recorded legacies of Ma Rainey are different in many significant ways. And yet, the stories surrounding these divas are also importantly similar, as well. As genealogical cornerstones, both 'Ma' Rainey and Thea Kronborg lay into the

[161] Jones, *Corregidora*, 66-67.
[162] Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 92-95, 93.

foundation of divas very particular forms of queerness, which is made legible through the performance of the sublime on stage, whether this is at the Metropolitan Opera or on the stage of the Monogram Theater in Chicago. Cather certainly sets a model for how divas are determined figures of *self-invention* who slyly nourish and attract a queer undercurrent in *The Song of the Lark's* Thea Kronborg. This is admittedly a top-down process: the diva—though she may be queer herself—produces queer reverberations when she has completed the process of self-authorship and reaches the pinnacle of success. Likewise, Cather's novel can only produce these queer reverberations in a readership that participates in a predominantly white bourgeois literary culture. The contribution that Rainey makes, though, is to think of divas as figures of *cultural-invention*, changing the aesthetic and sensory terrain for twentieth-century divas such that they are no longer merely figures who represent the white worlds of opera. To pursue 'Ma' Rainey as one might pursue Thea Kronborg is to discover a different process; it is to become enmeshed in blackness and queerness, feeling the new bodily territory that she charts from the bottom-up. Instead of singing from the Met or attempting to approximate the literary art that Cather's novels aspire to, Rainey saturated a sonic market from below, distributing the same important gestures to queerness—in sounds and spectacles—across a wider swatch of territory and access. Her success in the burgeoning recording industry shows us the *demand* for blues divas, for figures that, as Sterling Brown asserted, will "Git way inside us, // Keep us strong." On the one hand, this signals a growing desire for newly commodified forms of blackness. But on the other hand, Rainey's success as a performing and recording diva reveals an altogether different legacy. John Jones in "Of the Coming of John" hungered for freedom after encountering the sublime, and perhaps this hunger for freedom shows itself in the legend of 'Ma' Rainey, which illustrates a desire from predominantly working-class black folk for new models and spectacular ways of

embodying blackness and queerness. Furthermore, this same desire reflects the pursuit of the queer sublime, and the role divas play in stretching a newly constituted terrain of race and sexuality.

Chapter 2

"I am Not a Diva"—On Being Grace Jones, a Force of Nature

> *"I hate that word* ***diva****. It's been so abused! Every singer given a makeover or a few weeks on a talent show seems to be called a diva these days! Christ almighty. Where's the exclusivity? It's so commercial now. Call me something else. Call me by my name…I am not a diva. I am a Jones!"*—Grace Jones, from *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*[163]

The above passage from Grace Jones's co-written memoir—expressing extreme distaste for the title of 'diva'—seems to fly in the face of the genealogy I'm building that would place Jones at a crucial position in the development of divadom. But she's right. Here in the mid-2010s, everyone from Beyoncé to Hillary Clinton seems to have been called a diva, and the word diva is attached to nail salons, clothing lines, and hair stores, ostensibly watering down or overusing an otherwise powerful and historically rich signifier and figure. Even though Jones hesitates here to remain in the diva club, now that everyone has been invited, I want to remind us of the role she played in its construction and development in the later half the 20th century. Particularly, Jones helped to further cement the figure of the diva to both queerness and blackness. Her strong response to the appellation of diva seems to be less about the concept of divadom itself, and more to do with who Jones may have to share the title with. Even though Jones might insist she isn't a diva, her distaste for the term betrays that she *is* one, and that she paved the way for newer divas and modeled inventive strategies of diva performance. Jones's brand of diva is important in a genealogy of divas because it marks the place where subcultures dance under the attention of the mainstream, blackness and queerness become avant-garde, and most importantly, Jones brings us to a place for divas where spectacles of abjection become sublime.

---

[163] Grace Jones and Paul Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* (New York: Gallery Books, 2015), 363-364.

After divas became racialized figures of performance, rising from predominantly African-American communities in the early days of the blues, divas continued to perform racial and sexual identity through the development and marketing of the musical genres of gospel and Jazz. Though it's cliché for any account of an era or decade to say, "*this* decade is the one that changed everything," I do believe that the discotheques of the 1970s created special spaces for queer and/or black bodies, specifically spaces where those bodies could *publicly* congregate, dance, and cruise for sex. These disco spaces allowed for pleasure and the bodily exploration of positions of difference. The changes that disco brought to musical performance were highly aestheticized, eroticized, and were enmeshed with the avant-garde worlds of art and fashion. The uniqueness of disco allowed for the production of theatric spectacle, giving divas the ability to not only become 'larger than life' in a different space and time, but also giving divas the ability to collaborate and craft themselves with and against the changing demands of the culture industry. Thus, the theatric spectacles that divas produced on stage in disco were significantly different from either those vaudevillian-influenced stage dynamics of Ma Rainey or the classical configurations and sounds of opera. In 1977, just as disco was beginning to peak—and then ebb—in popularity, an eccentric and commanding figure emerged through the haze of bodies and drugs, none other than the legendary Jamaican-born model turned singer turned actress, Grace Jones.

In this chapter, I will contextualize Grace Jones's rise to fame within the spatial and performative framework of disco, and how Jones's own work within disco brought important contributions to understandings of race and sexuality in the 1970s. I would be remiss if I did not gesture to the fact that this is the same time that period marked the critical beginnings of what we now understand as Women of Color Feminism and more specifically, Black Feminism. I see

Jones as an important contemporary of black feminist thinkers and authors like Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, and Adrian Piper; as such, Jones's performative politics reveal her to be concerned with similar issues of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship that these thinkers and authors were tackling at this same historical moment. And, even though I am not able to provide a complete comparative analysis between Jones and these other thinkers/writers, I am convinced that her work aligns with them, and should be heralded as importantly as theirs. So as much as Jones is a performer for and of blackness, her own performance style and practice indexes and blossoms out of the new forms of queerness that were rising within this historical moment of the 1970s. Her career likewise spans beyond the 1970s and carries into the early 21st century an important lesson and legacy about queer subcultures and the connectivity between race and sexuality. Jones is a seminal figure among the divas of the long 20th century, and here I will look closely at her beginnings as a disco starlet, to her late-career as an avant-garde pop legend. Additionally, so much of Jones's history and career aligns with the changes in queerness and gay life that accompanied New York City from the 1970s to present. This chapter takes seriously the question posed by Uri McMillan, "What happens, I ask, if we reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency rather than its antithesis, as a strategy rather than simply a primal site of injury?" McMillan sees the objecthood and abjection as packaged together in understandings of black subjectivity, and that neither are inherently limiting paradigms.[164] With this in mind, the way that Jones inhabits the abject space of blackness within US culture demands our attention; she speaks her own body into existence, and carves new spaces for blackness and queerness through the strategic manipulation of whiteness and the avant-garde sensibilities associated with cosmopolitan gayness. Jones lets us

[164] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art And Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

see and hear what divas can accomplish within the world of the social. We can feel what divas are capable of when they strongly resist the edicts of respectability and intelligibility – they wield the power to make queerness *felt* within the body.

Jones exists as a 'gay icon' but also queers that position in a way that makes her distinct from other figures of disco, such as Donna Summer or Gloria Gaynor. Jones's self-identified freakiness is part of what makes her so important in a pantheon of divas who have served or partied with a queer constituency.[165] Or, as Francesca Royster understands it, Jones's own strangeness is what inspires and germinates the seeds of strangeness—that is to say queerness—in others.[166] The central performative events that will generate this discussion will be Jones's performance at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City in 1978, and her 'Return to Roseland' performance at the same venue in 2012. In addition to these performances, I will consider Jones's presence in gay, black, fashion, or other avant-garde publications, and also her own account of her career within her co-written autobiography with Paul Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*. How does Jones, as one of the most outré and memorable divas of both disco and gay culture, respectively, contribute to and complicate our understandings of how queerness and blackness are negotiated through performance? Where does Jones fit in among conceptualizations of blackness and the staged spectacle of black femininity in contemporary US culture? And finally, why is it important that Jones is now experiencing a kind of reemergence within queer consciousness, especially in places like NYC that so critically staged her initial success? The changing face of NYC across the late 20th Century shows the strength of late capitalism at normativizing a queer constituency, through the losses brought by HIV/AIDS,

[165] To Jones, freak always signals a particular mode of difference and artistry. Hugh Boulware, "Grace Jones: A Down-To-Earth 'Freak,'" *Chicago Tribune*, Dec 27, 1989. C1.
[166] Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like A No-no?: Queer Sounds And Eccentric Acts In The Post-soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 142.

gentrification of neighborhoods, and the scouring of public sex. And yet, through all this, Jones has remained a symbolic and important figure of a gayness that is 'a little off,' or queer. Her 2012 performance likewise defies the polish of even the 'weirdest' contemporary pop stars and speaks to a lingering interest in a queerness that is messy and defies being subsumed into the mainstream. I contend that Jones's abject body evokes an uneasy and terrorizing sublime, and her 'messy' performance style disburses queer affects to a wanting audience that demands and desires pain, pleasure, and chaos. In talking about Jones's performance style as messy, I am considering Martin Manalansan's theorization of queerness as mess, which "provides a vibrant analytical frame and a visceral phenomenological grip on the exigencies of marginalized queers—especially those who do not occupy the valorized homonormative spaces of the contemporary West."[167] Jones herself occupies and performs the mess of queerness not because she herself is disheveled or dirty, but rather because she occupies and wears a 'mess' of competing identities and affects which she negotiates on stage, often by lobbing them chaotically, unpredictably, at her audience. Importantly, Manalansan also reminds us that "Mess, therefore, is not always about misery, complete desolation, and abandonment but can also gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness."[168] As long as queerness itself is messy, chaotic, and unpredictable, performers like Jones will find an audience of queers that see themselves in her. This frenzy of chaos that Jones performs and evokes through a staging of the abject position of blackness draws subjects into it, producing a queer afterlife through this touch—this contact. Furthermore, this spectacular messiness that Jones brings to performance speaks to how positions of abjection are redolent with the unintelligibility of the sublime that resembles theorizations of both queerness and blackness. In the disco era, Jones helped to define

[167] Martin F. Manalansan IV, "The "Stuff" Of Archives," *Radical History Review* 120 (2014): 99.
[168] Manalansan, "The 'Stuff' of Archives," 100.

an era of excess, ecstasy, and queerness by reworking her own black body into an abject tool by which she is able to manipulate the desires of a white audience and simultaneously stage their humiliation. Her own unique position at the corners of national, racial, and gendered belonging also allowed her to perform and champion her own blackness, queerly.

A Roar, A Whipcrack, A Grunt

How does the diva augment her voice? How does the diva use her body to sing alongside her throat? For Jones, she made extensive use of her party-girl reputation while performing in urban disco spaces, making her shows feel like intense, costumed, and intoxicating parties that you were invited to partake in. In 1978, Jones's Halloween performance at the Roseland Ballroom[169] in Midtown NYC marked one of the earlier moments of Jones settling into her style as a performer through a conjuring and refiguring of animality and abjection to craft a new style of blackness on stage. This particular brand of blackness walks us through the abyss of the abject and pulls us back out on the side of desire, which Jones does strategically to manipulate, humiliate, and gain power over white bodies. Jones accomplishes this is by strategically and

[169] *A Note On Splintered Archives*
Before going into my discussion of Jones's 1978 performance at the Roseland Ballroom, I need to take note of the circumstances surrounding my ability to view and watch this performance. The only publicly available documentation of this performance exists as a highlight reel that has been uploaded to YouTube. This and one or two other specific songs from this performance have also been uploaded. As one might imagine, this is not ideal documentation for trying to argue in-depth for the significance of the performance. However, this conundrum begs particularly relevant questions for the field of performance studies, specifically "What do you do with a fragmented archive?" or "How do you talk about an performance that has (almost) been lost?" One might be tempted to simply *not talk* about such an archive or object, one that only exists in incompletion, but I doubt that our own memories are any *less* fragmented or error-filled than a spotty YouTube clip. Diana Taylor theorizes archives as the spaces and collections of canonized and institutionalized knowledge, while the repertoire is the realm of ephemeral gesture that often characterizes performance and its difficulty in being 'captured.' So, when the archive is not whole enough, you can only talk about the repertoire (See Taylor). I therefore focus my attentions on the gestures, intensities, and profound moments, and not assume any textual mastery over this imperfectly documented object of analysis.

repeatedly dominating her white, buffed-up man servants on stage. For instance, during her performance of "I Need a Man," she hides behind a white wedding veil, and holds a lit, incredibly long and phallic firecracker. As the song nears its end, her male stage-servants lift her veil, revealing a white corset and lingerie-set worn by Jones that is in stark contrast to her dark skin. She tenderly kisses one of her man-servants, and then looks annoyed and shoos them both away with her veil. She has a long leather whip draped around her neck, and she takes this moment to crack her whip furiously at the audience, with seeming indiscretion. She returns upstage to grab one of her man-servants, pulling him by the ear as though he were a disobedient child, being brought into the spotlight to be punished. In an apparent reversal of the powerlessness of the black and servile 'mammy' figure, Jones here acts as a disciplinary mother, infantilizing a muscled and shirtless white man on stage. She brings him to the center of the catwalk, in order to pull down his pants, all so that she can parade his thong-clad ass to the hungry queer audience. It seems that the man Jones really needed during the song was a white man to humiliate. On Jones's stage, white bodies are a plaything to Grace, toyed with before they are devoured.

Jones continues in this performance to embody a blackness that consumes and overpowers. Even a live tiger is prey to Jones. While the beginning notes of her song "Do or Die" begin to play, Jones, dressed in a tiger-striped catsuit, taunts and roars at an actual tiger caged on stage. After a stage blackout, a puff of smoke, and a sampled sound of a tiger's roar, the lights come up again to reveal Jones now inside the tiger's cage, licking her lips and taking the tiger's place within the cage. One could say that Grace is merely performing the cultural stereotypes of black femininity that are simultaneously hypersexualized and made bestial.[170] But

[170] Sherrie Farrell, "Grace Jones Role Unattractive In Bond Flick: Review," *The New Pittsburgh Courier*. June 22, 1985. 2. In fact, some of the black press later turned on Grace in the mid-1980s, as the New Pittsburgh Courier

Royster reminds us that Jones often brings forward these uncomfortable moments as strategic acts of disidentification.[171] Per Muñoz, disidentification is not only a performative or representational strategy, and in his analysis of the performer Vaginal Davis, states that "Disidentification, as a mode of analysis, registers subjects as constructed and contradictory. Davis's body, her performances, all her myriad texts, labor to create critical uneasiness, and, furthermore, to create desire within uneasiness."[172] Jones's performance and defiant wearing of the least respectable or most animal ideas of blackness serves to stage and highlight ideology itself, while also engendering a discomfort and 'uneasiness' that is simultaneously marshals desire. Jones disidentifies these perhaps-unsettling forms of blackness in order to make whiteness subservient to her, courting and corralling white desire.

In this same show, Jones creates further unsettling moments of physical touch between the diva on stage and the audience who surrounds her. After Jones's final performance of the show—her famous cover of Edith Piaf's 'La Vie En Rose"—she leisurely walks around the stage catwalk to greet and thank her audience. Though this is not necessarily an unusual thing for a performer to do in a more intimate concert venue, Jones's interpretation of this concert performance convention is unique. She is dressed only in gloves, a hood, and a coat—the front of which appear to be adorned entirely with fox tails. The entrance to Jones's body is guarded with animality; you must brush with the animal to reach this diva. As she begins to reach into the audience to touch the hands of her appreciative audience, someone appears to offer a (toy?) handgun—barrel facing the audience—to Jones. She takes the unusual gift in her hand, and says loudly into the microphone "Bang Bang! You're dead!" She continues her promenade around the

claimed that her performance in the James Bond film, *A View to a Kill* was merely resuscitating all of the worst stereotypes of black femininity which obscured "what real strength in black women is all about"

[171] Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 154.

[172] Muñoz, *Disidentification,* 115.

audience, asking for "A little touchy-poo" from the crowd, providing a pivotal moment of contact between the diva on stage and those below. Why do we respond to our divas with such terror, and why do we demand pain or death from them, handing them the gun, as it were? It's a slow walk from pain, to pleasure and exhilaration—in fact, mere proximity to the diva often creates a burry mixture of pain, pleasure, terror, ecstasy. As I will again show in my reading of Jones's 2012 concert, this particular combination of pleasure and terror marks the exact kind of sublimity that Jones evokes on stage through a performance of the abject—these are the same sublime moments where queerness and blackness most spectacularly coalesce. The stage was the initial and primary place where Jones was able to elicit these affects and become a diva. Without the stage, and an adoring audience, the diva has no teeth.

Gracing the Stage: A Night at the Discotheque

The thumping beats and the moving bodies of the developing era of disco in the 1970s set the stage for a performer like Jones to emerge and thrive. In many ways, Jones exemplifies all of the tensions, pleasures, problems, and possibilities that disco allowed. Disco charted new territories for black cultural expression, for the performance and intermingling of masculinity *and* femininity on stage. Disco also brought profound changes to the materialization and eroticization of (mostly) urban queer life. Throughout this discussion of disco and how it produced an afterlife in Grace Jones, I will repeatedly turn to both Alice Echol's history of disco, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, and Tim Lawrence's *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture 1970-1979* to situate Jones in time, space, and within an aural and performative cultural shift. Echols specifically charts the ways in which disco is indebted to earlier black musical forms like R&B and especially Funk, which

characterized the early 1970s before disco became the more mainstream musical form[173]. In some ways, the 1970s created a thirst for blackness among white listening audiences, eager for either the 'studly' black masculinity performed at the time, or the 'badass,' sexually liberated black femininity that was being marketed. Curiously, one of the more eccentric and interesting figures of Funk, Betty Davis, bore a performance style and character similar in many ways to Jones. Nikki Greene discusses the challenges that faced Davis in the music industry, and also from the black political institutions that aligned themselves with the politics of respectability. Davis, like Jones, adopted fierce aggression on stage, sexually explicit and provocative lyrics, and avant-garde stylings. [174] They both were also signed to Island Records, but somehow, Jones never seemed to experience the same kind of criticism from Island Records or the NAACP that Davis did regarding the exposure and embodiment of her own blackness. This is only partly a result of their specific artistry or aesthetic strategy, and more a result of their respective audiences, or even who Island Records imagined their respective audiences to be. Davis's main desire was to be a songwriter, not necessarily a performer, but her performances often involved sexually explicit material presented on stage to a predominantly black audience. This reminds us of similar icyness presented to the sexually explicit and provocative Blues performers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith from mainstream black cultural groups like the National Association of Colored Women.[175] Jones, on the other hand, came to music and singing rather unexpectedly, only after a successful modeling career, and began performing for mixed-race disco crowds. The audience that most gravitated towards her initially within this mixed-race crowd was predominantly gay men (thus she was given the moniker of 'Queen of the Gay Discos').

[173] Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and The Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) 1-38.
[174] Nikki A. Greene, "The Feminist Funk Power of Betty Davis and Renée Stout," *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013), 60-63.
[175] Davis*, Blues* Legacies, 42-44.

As opposed to Betty Davis's firm establishment within an African-American cultural context, Jones's Jamaican background and upbringing gives her a different context through which she understands her own blackness and position as a racialized subject. It is this distinction that perhaps further explains how Jones's performances of race aided in her ascent of fame and influence, whereas Davis's were unfortunate setbacks in her career. Jones's relationship to blackness is more tenuous and complicated, as is her relationship to her always mixed-race audience as well. Jones's memoir offers some insight into her understanding of her own position as a person of color, and how her conceptualization of race and her body are strategic positionings that allow her to move and act in the cultural realm. It also helps us to better understand why Jones might have been experimenting or reimagining blackness through her own performances and embodiment.

> I never really thought of myself as black, so it wasn't as though I consciously decided that I would behave in a way that black people didn't usually behave. In America they tried to force me to be … a traditional black person, to limit myself to the limitations imposed from outside on a black American, but I didn't want to go there. It seemed that would make me act like a victim, like the inferior person they wanted me to be by dismissing me as black—ruled by the language of the prejudiced—and I wanted to be ruled by my own language, my own way of putting and seeing things.I never wanted to limit myself to being A Black Woman, because that immediately puts a person on their back foot—beginning from a kind of negative space in order to prove the positive—and I never wanted to think of who I was as anything less than positive.[176]

At first glance, Jones's assurance that she has 'never really thought of myself as black' might give some readers an uneasy pause. But a closer look reveals that Jones resists the signification of what it means to be 'a traditional black person;' and her anxiety seems to be *less* about her race or blackness itself and *more* about her relationship to the United States and its relationship to race and blackness. To Jones, the discursive and aesthetic terrain of blackness in the United States was something overdetermined, and so we find in this above passage Jones's deliberate

[176] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 259-260.

attempt to stretch the parameters of blackness in queer ways, by not participating in the same discursive or aesthetic terrain normally mapped out for black subjects in the United States. Through this, we can see how Jones might try to explore and experiment with the aesthetics of blackness in different ways and to a different audience than Betty Davis and the audiences of funk that she performed for. In addition, Jones's ambivalent relationship to her own blackness is actually not an exception, but is rather much more often the rule, as Stuart Hall suggests in "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?", that "…in black popular culture, strictly speaking…there are no pure forms at all."[177] This is because the proliferation and negotiation of overdetermined forms of blackness within popular culture speaks to the fact that there is no 'authentic,' correct form of blackness, there is only the interplay of the multiple (and often contradictory) repertoires of how blackness could or should be performed.[178] We also see how Jones understands her racial and gendered identity as splintered and complex, stating that "If there was any woman in there, she was abstracted, hidden behind a mass of disorienting contradictions. I didn't want to act black, or white, or green."[179] The way she senses her own gendered and racialized body as full of contradictions is somewhat understandable. [180] What narratives does American culture give a dark-skinned, immigrant, androgynous black woman for success, influence, and power? In order for Jones to carve out and create such narratives anew, she adopts a queer understanding of her own race and gender, one that is productively messy,

[177] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no 1-2 (1993): 110.
[178] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 110.
[179] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 110.
[180] Similarly, in an October 1984 segment in *Interview* magazine, being interviewed by both Andy Warhol and André Leon Talley, Jones herself states "No, I don't think in color," but later in the interview recalls a time when an employee of Kenzo Takada had discriminated against her on the basis of race. This episode serves as another reminder that even though Jones has strategies that deliberately try to defy the aesthetic and discursive expectations ascribed to her on the basis of race, these strategies do not make her immune from the effects of race or racism in either the music or fashion industries. See André Leon Talley and Andy Warhol, "New Again: Grace Jones," *Interview*, July 16, 2014, reprint from Oct 1984 issue.

fragmented, and unintelligible. Remember that per Manalansan, queerness is often configured in messy and unpredictable ways. It is significant that Jones perceived her audience during the disco-era as a primarily gay mixed-race audience—and not an entirely black audience. This informs the dynamics of how performer and audience relate to each other, and it likewise informs the specifics of how blackness is performed, exaggerated, and embodied on stage. Jones's success with such a mixed-race audience is from her ability to be ready queerly—able to appeal and respond to multiple gazes—while maintaining a stance that was powerful, androgynous, excessive, harsh.

Jones's own performance of racial and sexual excess fits into the larger oeuvre of disco, which was always somewhat about excess and queerness—performing abundance and difference in a way that eroticized it and made it fabulous. The whole idea of having an underground disco scene was to give these 'excessive' bodies—i.e. gay men and/or persons of color—a space for pleasure away from the penetrating gaze of mainstream, white heteronormative society. Not surprisingly, New York City was one of the most important 'scenes' where these discos were able to bubble up in the service of queerness and pleasure.[181] These scenes were not stable places that resided solely on the dance floor or in some hip bar but were perhaps also important performative acts of doing. As described by Gregory Bredbeck, "Like disco itself, identity and community are processes, things that cannot simple *be*, but that must be constantly *done*."[182] The doing of these spaces and processes of community and identity carried with them unique sets of tensions, specifically, as disco became more popular, queers and people of color struggled to keep these disco spaces hidden from the seeking eyes of yuppie straight, white-folk who were

[181] John-Manuel Andriote, *Hot Stuff: A Brief History of Disco* (New York: HarperEntertainment, 2001), 20-21.
[182] Gregory W. Bredbeck, "Troping the Light Fantastic: Representing Disco Then and Now," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 100.

looking for cultural capital by dancing with gays and people of color.[183] Lest we believe too-strongly in the somewhat utopian view of disco as a perfect mix of races, genders, and sexualities all dancing peacefully in the same place, these spaces, though often mixed in regards to race, class, gender, and sexuality, were just as often exclusionary and discriminatory. Disco was more inclusive in its earlier days, and as it developed and spread, women and people of color tended to be disallowed from the more exclusive gay white discos, while gay men, in turn, were made to feel unwelcomed in discos that had become straight stomping grounds.[184] Even so, the symbolic importance of legacy of disco is one that radiates an urban queer and black cosmopolitanism. Radio stations at the time were hesitant to even play disco tracks until those same tracks began selling in large numbers in record stores.[185] Where disco was most important, then, was at the club – at the discotheque – in the live space of bodies moving and touching and singing. For queer persons, this was historically significant; during much of the 1960s and prior, same-sex dancing was often forbidden, and even in mafia-run bars that served a predominantly gay clientele, explicit same-sex dancing or touching risked interruption by police raids.[186] In a cultural moment where queer touch was so recently forbidden in the public sphere, disco, in some ways, helped to map queerness as a *felt* terrain of touches, sounds, movements, and pleasures in an era of slightly less explicit state violence against queerness.[187]

Disco helped to stage the parameters for queer embodiment in the 1970s, even as it simultaneously helped to change the way divas performed on stage; the technologies of

---

[183] Andriote, *Hot Stuff*, 22-23.
[184] Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 61-70. See also Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves The Day: A History Of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 406-441.
[185] Andriote, *Hot Stuff*, 52-53.
[186] Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 42-57
[187] Gregory Bredbeck described disco as crucial for the production identities in difference, going so far as to describe disco as a space that "provides a place to go to be *difference*, the fluid and amorphous phenomenological process that exists not between identities but within them." See Bredbeck, "Troping the Light Fantastic," 95.

remixing, deejaying, and extending songs to interminable lengths drastically altered the actual amount of singing that happened during a performance. What then, was the diva to do, when she is not singing throughout the entirety of her time on stage? If the diva can no longer merely stand, gesticulate, and belt out an aria, or soulfully croon into a microphone at center stage, what performative options are there for divas in the disco era who still want to enthrall an audience? Moving, dancing, gyrating, and roaring seems to be what rose from these remixed ashes.[188] The theatrics that Grace Jones wed to her stage productions exemplify the way that divas, in the cultural moment of disco, became energetic performers whose body and presence stirs a frenzied affect on stage and in the audience. It is not as though the diva's voice loses importance, but rather that the diva's body also becomes her voice, and begins to speak in turn, crafting spectacle, enrapture, sublimity. Jones exemplifies these changes and has made her lasting mark not necessarily from her vocal talent or songwriting, but from her reputation at stirring-up this frenzied affect on stage.

Not everyone has been convinced, though, of the effectiveness of the disco-era's innovative staging of new queer and black femininities. Historian Judy Kutulas writes of disco divas that "…most people didn't see disco divas perform live; disco was dance music, not concert music. There were no intimate concert experiences where female fans might get to know performers they already knew…Disco women were all surface glitz; they otherwise conveyed little sense of individuality or personality."[189] In many ways, this more recent critique by Kutulas of disco is not unique, and it rehashes a remarkably similar critique which was lobbed at disco in

[188] Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 10.
[189] Judy Kutulas, "You Probably Think This Song Is About You: 1970s Women's Music from Carole King to the Disco Divas," In *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in The 1970s,* edited by Sherrie Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 189.

the 1970s. Such a potentially classic critique of the genre also reproduces the same homophobic and implicitly racist responses to disco historians of disco have painstakingly outlined.[190]

What Kutulas critiques as 'surface glitz,' and a lack of 'individuality or personality' in disco performance betrays a Kantian method of engaging with aesthetic objects, whereby she values a calm, sensible, disinterested method of listening and participating in musical cultures (for her specifically, folk music ala Carly Simon is authentic musical beauty). As I have outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, disinterestedness primarily serves whiteness, normative masculinity, and heteronormativity. Disco defies disinterestedness because as a social, cultural, and aesthetic practice is it antithetical to the calm, distanced detachment that comes with disinterestedness—disco rather revels in proximity, touch, and an affective frenzy that is located within the body and felt between bodies. With respect to Kutulas's argument, the *production* of disco did often elide the body or creative input of the performer; in Jones's memoir, Chris Blackwell, founder of Jones's label Island Records, recalls the way producer Tom Moulton 'worked' with Jones in the studio.[191] "[Tom Moulton] distanced you from being involved in your own music, and I think by [his] not involving you *(Jones)* and your personality, the tracks had less and less impact. There was no sense of your own identity on your own records, because you were not allowed to be a part of the creative process, even if in terms of the music reacting to

[190] One can see the similarities more closely between Kutulas's complaints about disco and infamous music personalities like Steve Dahl, as described in Gillian Frank's "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco," which explains that the musical audiences of rock and roll or folk music were uncomfortable with the highly active, participatory audience experience that disco engendered. The former was seen as an 'authentic,' 'appropriate' style of listening and engaging with music, while the latter was perceived as a chaotic, messy, or shallow style of listening and engaging. See Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 276-306.

[191] I turn to Chris Blackwell's words here with the knowledge that his family connections to the sugar industry in Jamaica may make him an unfortunate and unlikable figure to reference, even as he supported Jones throughout much of her career. While Jones's warm relationship with Blackwell does not erase or mitigate these complicities with the colonial legacy of his family, I turn to his words here to highlight how disco offered Jones a chance to impress as a performer, even if she was ultimately divorced from much of the recording process of creating the music she was singing.

your presence and your energy [sic]."[192] So, while performers like Jones might have had little control over their sound—we must consider that it is exactly *because* of such production practices that made the *performance* of disco music by divas like Jones so crucially important.

To that end, disco spaces often relied on the creation of a concert-like experience, in tandem with dancing and cruising. Venues like Studio 54, Paradise Garage, or Roseland Ballroom would book performers like Jones, who would sing the hits while their audiences would watch and dance. Gillian Frank claims that "disco placed the bodies of its audience on display and displaced the performers and the idea of congregating around a live act."[193] So while audiences obviously were going to see Grace Jones if they bought a ticket to her show, and to 'congregate around a live act,' it was not as if they were seated in muted, quiet appreciation of the diva. They were in attendance to laugh, dance, whoop, be *seen* by others in the audience, cruise. In the disco era, and at the Roseland Ballroom, diva worship becomes a public forum for queer sociality. Disco allowed an audience to pay particular attention to the performing and augmented body on stage. Francesca Royster asserts that when we look at Jones "as a performer rather than a produced media spectacle, we are allowed to think of her as an agent always in collaboration with an audience." [194] Royster thus allows us to think of the possibilities embedded within the performative moment, that it is not only capital that forms the body on stage, but also an audience full of affect and the affinities they develop with the performer. She also reminds us that Jones comes across as a *powerful* performer whose ethos and personality is so sure that it's hard to imagine her being crushed or manipulated wholesale by the culture industry. Jones's own

[192] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 209.
[193] Frank, "Discophobia," 291.
[194] Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*. 156. Royster's point here is reminiscent of Richard Dyer's crucial work, *Stars*, which insists that even though the culture industry can produce the stage, lights, costumes, and script, the star uniquely owns her performance—and that stars are not inert objects. See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: Educational Advisory Service, British Film Institute, 1979).

words corroborate this sentiment, as in an episode of Andy Warhol's 1987 *Fifteen Minutes*, where she compares herself to a pied piper that leads her fans and followers into precarious aesthetic worlds. Jones states that this journey may lead her audience off of a cliff, into a precarious void, but she seems unconcerned. Perhaps the void is where her audience wants to end up.

Becoming Abject: Sculpting Blackness and Queerness

Disco was the terrain through which Jones was able to show in performance the confluences between two signifiers: black and queer. A sample of the newspapers and other print sources that promoted Jones in the late 1970s and early 1980s reveal the extent to which the live performance of the diva within disco was crucial to disco's own development and popularity. Such print texts reveal the very racial and gendered controversies that Jones courted through her performance persona, and also the affinities that developed between Jones and a queer audience. In regards to the latter, and in a similar manner to how Kutulas just doesn't seem to 'get' disco, John Rockwell of the New York Times reviewed a 1977 performance of Jones's and was mystified by her role and presence within a queer disco subculture. He says that "one wishes her act was a little better—a little more stylish and a little less sophomorically vulgar…Fine to be a sensation, but better still to be sensational, and that Miss Jones definitely is not."[195] The performative messiness and chaos that Jones is most known for is what Rockwell mistakes for a lack of talent. It is also another way to read Jones as queer, hearkening back to Manalansan—that her very style of performing, and not only her body—marks her as queer. This unintelligibility in mess belongs as much to queerness as it does to blackness, and as I describe in more detail in the

[195] John Rockwell, "Grace Jones, Cult Darling, Returns, Miming Tableaux of Dominance," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1977, 43.

following section, it performs the work of the abject as a conduit to the sublime. While the mainstream press derided her for the lack of 'polish,' the black press at this time—through publications like The New Pittsburgh Courier and New York Amsterdam News—roundly praised the arrival of this outré and dark-skinned diva. The latter ran a long piece about Jones's style influences, citing both African and East-Asian traditions, and also emphasized the gay fan base she performed for, who ravenously and furiously danced and screamed at her shows.[196] As the body on stage was given prominence in disco, a body like Jones's was able to engage with the assumptions of excess and emptiness that circulate around both blackness and queerness. In fact, much of the media's press on Jones likewise suggests—as Royster does—that Jones is an agent in a relationship with her producers *and* her audience. A 1979 interview in Billboard tells us that Jones was one of the first disco acts to successfully adapt to the pressures of taking a live show into the discotheque, setting a precedent for pop stars to marry their aural and visual imaginaries to a particular musical zeitgeist.[197] Fred Moten, in his landmark book *In The Break*, argues that blackness has always existed through aural imaginaries in the face of the attempted silencings of occularcentrism. He calls for a radical black synesthesia, where sound is seen and sight is heard.[198] To Moten, this is the way blackness acquires a materiality through the sensorial, a felt presence through sound and vision that allows blackness to remain and linger. Returning to Stuart Hall's essay that I discussed earlier, we similarly see that blackness in popular culture is always performed through a repertoire that focuses on: an emphasis on *style*, eschewing the myth of a 'deeper' authenticity; *music*, which attempts to create an alternative discursive terrain for

[196] See Marie Moore, "The Many Fascinating Facets of Bald and Beautiful Grace Jones." *New York Amsterdam News*. December 3, 1977, 36. See also Farrell, and "Grace Jones: From Europe's Model to Disco Diva," *The New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 22, 1978, 18.
[197] See "A Pregnant Grace Jones: Bigger and Better than Ever," *Billboard*. 91: 44. 1979, 64-65.
[198] Moten, *In The Break*, 234-235.

blackness; and a deliberate focus on *the body* to effect influence into the realm of representation.[199] Jones represents an illustrative example of Hall's theory here, and she also performs blackness in the exact what Moten describes. Her repertoire is always one that confuses the senses and combines body, music, and style, so that it may be read and felt across many sensory registers. And, she insists that such synesthesia was an innate part of the production process of her music in the period after she abandoned her place as a disco queen. She recalls of the production process in her memoir,

> We blew up this photo that was eventually used for the cover of *Warm Leatherette*, me as an ominous, hard-eyed samurai filtered through something occult and African, the killer clown interrupting some mysterious ceremony. … Chris [Blackwell] said to the band, *Make a record that sounds like that looks*. … Then we made sure the music suited the photo, what Jean-Paul described as the erotic menace… Skin like no other skin, Baudelaire's brown deity: Jean-Paul exaggerated my differences to the point of exorbitance, and the music had to follow.[200]

What is most interesting about this passage is not only the way Jones's image and sound were collaboratively constructed to create the unique presentation of blackness that we know in her, but also that Jones is very much aware of the strong and uncomfortable racial references being indexed both in her sound and image. Simultaneously a 'hard-eyed samurai,' 'occult and African,' 'killer clown,' 'erotic menace,' and 'brown deity,' Jones seems to willingly put on all of these highly racial tropes, but only if in the process of the collaboration between her body and her production team these tropes are 'exaggerated…to the point of exorbitance.' This performance of blackness—rooted in exaggeration—gives sound and visualization to the unspeakable absences of race. To Moten, this will give voice to the objecthood that blackness has been ascribed to.[201] Jones styles herself in this exact way, giving voice to blackness not only

[199] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 109.
[200] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 215-216.
[201] Moten, *In The Break*, 1-24.

with her vocal cords, but through her meticulously adorned and augmented body and image. Moten says that the visual is always sonic. In that case, what are the sounds that Jones's body makes? Her body talks not just through a staccato voice penetrating her audience, or the soaring roar of her disco vocals, but also through a piercing gaze, a stillness on stage or in print images that always reads as defiant, unwilling to surrender. She sings blackness and queerness even when she is at her most silent; her stillness objects to objecthood, and her roar works to overturn it. She wears her blackness messily, queerly performing her race by treating racial stereotypes as costumes to haphazardly put on and leave strewn on stage when they no longer serve or amuse her. Jones is a diva who always retains the prerogative to *refuse*. Just as she refuses the very signifier of diva, in stating "I am not a diva," she refuses the circulating ideas, ideologies, and images surrounding her race or gender by embodying all of them carelessly and making them seem somewhat otiose to her. Here, the diva creates possibilities for nonchalance and self-determination with regards to identity. Even if Jones is consumed as a commodity—a piece of music or the cover of a magazine—as a diva she is not acquiescing to the position of objecthood.

Through these visual and aural strategies, Jones is returning the commodifying gaze ascribed to objects. As a way to understand the efficacy of such strategies, I believe Jones is performing what Nicole Fleetwood would call 'excess flesh'—a strategy for black women to respond to the super-determined cultural ideas that circulate around black femininity, namely those that mark black femininity as excessive or 'too much.' Specifically, she states that "Excess flesh…is another conceptual framework for understanding the black body as a figuration of hypervisibility. Excess flesh is an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that *anticipates its rehearsed*

performance of abjection." (emphasis mine)[202] Jones operates on the periphery of white cultural standards of propriety, black respectability, and seems to be playing into a representational trap of performing that which cultural norms have already prescribed for her. But Jones does not play into a *neat* narrative of black excess or objectification of femininity. In fact, Jones is primarily a performer of disorganization—wearing these cultural excesses and signifiers in such a way that they border on unintelligibility and read as queer. Fleetwood clarifies the utility of excess flesh a little further, claiming "Excess flesh as an enactment, while not necessarily resistant, can be productive in conceiving of an identificatory possibility for black female subjects that refuses the aberrant representations of the black female subject in dominant visual culture."[203] In other words, no, Jones is not singlehandedly uprooting racism, sexism, or the representational ideals circulating within mainstream culture that elevate white standards of beauty and demonize black femininity, but she is opening up a space and a conversation for alternatives of how black femininity may be embodied.[204] What kinds of bodies or poses of being does Jones make possible through her grunts and defiant commands? Not just for herself, rather, how does Jones's own body in spectacle inflect and change the bodies who view her in everyday life?

The Thing That Should Not Be

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but

[202] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, And Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112.
[203] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 122.
[204] In a similar vein, Jacqueline Brady suggests that depictions of black women as strong, muscular, and athletic (like Jones) may be playing into the tropes of black femininity as excessive, but they may also be creating crucial visual touchstones to think about black femininity as strong, and able to resist narratives of subservience and powerlessness. See Jacqueline Brady, "Pumping Iron with Resistance: Carla Dunlap's Victorious Body," In *Recovering The Black Female Body: Self-representations By African American Women,* Edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 262.

> it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced – Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.[205]

Part of Jones's enduring performative ethos is to interpret blackness and queerness through a staging of the abject. Julia Kristeva's famous explication of the abject is narrated almost as a horrific myth or rumor, and her curiosity and fascination with abjection stems from the abject's ability to blur the lines between self/other, pain/pleasure, outside/inside, and many other sensory, affective, or bodily boundaries. In the abstract, the abject is that impossibility of form or figure that stems from the deep crevices and gaps in cultural intelligibility. Specifically, the abject comes from the places that we don't want to see or experience. Jones disidentifies with the abject position blackness is relegated to, and does so strategically, in order to stage this slippage between self and other that characterizes the abject, reminding you that a revulsion towards the abject is only a hairs-breadth away from desire. Jones, within an American context is 'the thing that should not be': an androgynous, loud, sexual, dark-skinned, immigrant, defiant woman of color. American culture desires all of these assumptions about blackness and has a fascination with blackness only equaled by the same horror of it. Jones is the thing that American culture wants to hide – is afraid of. But as Kristeva reminds us, the abject is already within us, within our bodies, and I would argue also within the body politic.[206] Blackness has always been a part of the American cultural imaginary, no matter how hard the state tries to hide or subdue it. America has cast everything that Grace Jones represents as abject and abhorrent, but she is already inside, part of its desires. Her unintelligibility is not merely her androgyny, or her race, but the combined and intersectional ways in which her performance style stages a paradoxical

[205] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.
[206] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

confluence of identities as 'the thing that should not be.' The intensity of confronting the abject is both ecstatic and terror-inducing, because, as Kristeva claims,

> The abject is edged with the sublime…For the sublime has no object either. When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear or think. The 'sublime' object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be… [T]he sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling.[207]

To Kristeva, the sublime is only shallowly buried beneath abjection. Both challenge the limits of form, embodiment, and intelligibility. This is crucial if we want to understand how queerness and blackness operate as a function of the sublime through Jones. The sublime emerges when we see 'the thing that should not be,' when the abject becomes the thing without form or limits. The sublime 'expands us, overstrains us,' challenging the thresholds of our perceptions and also carrying a sense of movement, as it 'causes us to be both *here*… and *there*,' distorting our senses, making us feel both a part of something or someone, and then become its other. Jones's own body acted as an abject tool in collaboration with the overstimulation within the discotheques of the 1970s—the dance floor, the music, the sex, and the drugs. This combination of abjection, pleasure, and danger creates a sublime that is always already as queer as it is black. The sublime moment fades, but it fades into 'a bottomless memory,' storing itself in the reservoirs of cultural memory to resurface later—just as there are 34 years between Jones's 1978 performance and 2012 performance at Roseland Ballroom.

The abject is bounded by the sublime, but also creates a porous boundary between self and other, or even hatred and desire. Looking at the writings of Audre Lorde in the mid-1980s,

[207] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.

we get a similar sense of how other black women around the same time period were exploring similar questions of blackness and abjection. Lorde is particularly interested in the affects of hatred that produce anger and rage in and at black subjects, and how everyday experiences of black subjects often case them as abjected. Lorde famously recalls a memory from her childhood on the subway in NYC, sitting next to a seemingly wealthy white woman—two others encountering and responding to each other.

> On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me…And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. … Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.[208]

From this anecdote Lorde offers us, we see that anti-black racism turns her childhood body into a body of abjection. To the white woman, a black body in such close proximity disrupts the comfort of her own self that she sees as free from blackness and abjection. And yet, this white woman cannot stop looking at that which she considers abject – it draws her attention and sensory focus. She is enveloped. Lorde claims that this position of being made into abject, being the recipient of such hatred, is what creates the productive and challenging anger in black women. The sensory investment involved in this hatred resembles the same sensory obsessions of desire, and helps to explain how the abject maps this slippage between hatred of blackness into desire of/for it. For Jones, forcing a confrontation with the abject in her audience draws them in and stretches their understanding of the sensory contours of the body. You see the abject, feel it, hear it, sense it. You cannot escape the abject because it is always so close to you, disturbing the safety of the boundaries of the self that we consider to be impermeable. Jones takes

[208] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club. 1984), 147-148.

advantage of this, enveloping her audience in a performance of blackness, culling desire in her audience, bringing them closer to her. To many white gay men of the disco era in her audience at the Roseland Ballroom in 1978 and in 2012, they desire Jones, her fierceness, her power, her presence—Jones has subtly reminded them how thin the line is between the abject and desire. While, to those non-white gay men in her audience Jones is a destiny of sorts, where they empathize and identify with her power and rage, energized by the possibility that their bodies could be styled and held as hers. From this vantage point, Jones is able to be The Thing That Should Not Be, and, to her audience, The Thing I Want To Be.

To think of race or blackness specifically as abject follows Darieck Scott's line of argumentation, who claims that the abjection of black bodies is a perhaps unexpectedly erotic and queer site of subject formation. The queer possibilities that arise from a sustained focus on abjection comes from Scott's argument that "the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive *power*…This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary."[209] Thus to Scott what is queer about the abject is its insistence on porosity—that boundaries between categories of identity and place, or self and other, are relentlessly permeable. The abject does not give us the comfort that stability in identity brings. Nor indeed, does Grace Jones. Part of what Scott sees as

[209] Scott specifically turns to an archive of black men to discuss race and abjection, so as to avoid an inadvertent confirmation of black femininity as always already existing in a state of inalterable abjection. I take his hesitations seriously, but I proceed in applying his theory to a discussion of Jones because she allows us to see how precisely abjection becomes a tool by which black femininity reworks itself, gaining social influence and power in the process. See Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, And Sexuality In The African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.

useful about the abject—its ability to strip away the perceived stability of form and identity, is what I see as aesthetically useful about the sublime, through the abject. Jones's performance of abjection allows her to evoke sublime moments where mess, chaos, rage, anger, suddenly and seamlessly transform into awe, terror, pleasure, ecstasy, and desire. The abject is both an aesthetic strategy, a sensorial repertoire, and a historical reality in which Jones engages to perform the work of divadom.

This performance of blackness by Jones invokes outsiderness and abjection in a way that she uses to her advantage to sculpt new formations of what blackness and queerness can look or feel like. More than 10 years after the Halloween concert at Roseland in 1978, in an interview with the Chicago Tribune, Jones speaks explicitly about her strategic performance of the 'freak.' She identifies strongly with the figure of the freak, but also sees it as part of her creative stage persona that she has sculpted over time, reminding us again that Jones consistently aspires to be an agent of her own representation.[210] In a 2015 essay published in *Pitchfork*, Barry Walters walks us through Jones's career history, noting all of the places where Jones was performing against the cultural grain, was considered too black, too weird, too outlandish for American MTV, and muses that performers like this are doing cultural work *for* their audiences, specifically for black and queer audiences. If an audience can identify with this performer, who operates at the margins of cultural intelligibility, then an entire audience now can imagine their own selves and bodies becoming similarly queered, comforted, knowingly being different. Walters closes his piece saying, "Grace did that for me, for her audience, for anyone who has ever been too queer, too black, too female, or too freaky for the world around them. Grace Jones

[210] See Boulware, "Grace Jones: A Down-To-Earth 'Freak.'"

is liberation."[211] Divas do not have to operate in safe terrain, in fact, some of the most important work that divas do is to make legible subcultural and outsider feelings through voice and image, mitigating the affects of loneliness and melancholy that frequently characterize queerness and blackness, offering possibilities for bodies and communities to touch. Jones's questionable 'palatability' to a mainstream American audience may have precluded her ability to ever consistently top the charts, but it did leave an important legacy for the black and queer communities that initially supported and birthed her. It seems Jones has always been doing queer work, regardless of whether she is read as queer or not.

When people have asked me "Is Grace Jones queer?" I'm never quite sure how to answer. And, I think it's more than just her connection to a historically gay fan base that makes her queer. I take for granted that people might not know of her, or so distinctly remember her statuesque poses, animalistic screams, and androgynous angles that all seem to scream queer. To tell you the truth, I always associated Jones with queerness, which suggests that queerness is always less about identity and more about how one is positioned and charged through with non-normative affect. I first encountered Jones in depth while browsing YouTube a decade ago with my drag-sister, watching her belt 'La Vie En Rose' in a curtain of fog, and with a nipple that was consistently escaping her dress. We felt like we had just accomplished a good queer deed just by learning of her. Knowing about Grace Jones was a kind of language I had with other people; if you knew about Jones, you were 'my people,'—a weirdo like me.

In the long swath of time between 1978 and 2012, the career of Jones boomed during the 1980s, and subtly quieted during the 1990s and 2000s; New York City, likewise, experienced an

[211] Barry Walters, "As Much As I Can, As Black As I Am: The Queer History Of Grace Jones," *Pitchfork*, August 25, 2015.

immense period of development in the 1980s in an attempt to 'clean up' or 'revitalize' the midtown/Times Square area of Manhattan—significantly where the Roseland Ballroom is located. The decadent era of disco turned the corner on 'coolness' and came to an end. These changes in public attitude towards disco were often generated by straight, white, male figures in the music industry who resented the propinquity shared by disco and gay male culture broadly.[212] In her memoir, Jones quips that "Where [disco] ended up was the fault of the white, straight music business, which drained it of all its blackness and gayness, its rawness and volatility, its original contagious, transgressive abandon."[213] [214] Similarly, the 1980s brought Reaganism and an AIDS epidemic that largely decimated and flattened the cultures of difference and sexual openness that NYC was notorious for, and which largely constituted Jones's most enthusiastic audience. More specifically, the 1980s and 1990s drastically changed the NYC of John Rechy's quasi-autobiographical novel *City of Night*, Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red: Times Square*

[212] Gillian Frank's "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco" offers a thorough analysis of the Disco Demolition Party held at Comiskey Park in Chicago in 1979, an event planned by radio DJ Steve Dahl, and which was largely considered one of the defining moments where the disco's popularity began to wane in the public eye. Frank's argument is that the backlash against disco was oftentimes explicitly homophobic, and how the rise and fall of disco itself mirrors the setbacks of the gay rights movement in the 1970s. Curiously, though punk music and rock and roll audiences were somewhat responsible for this change in public attitude towards disco, Grace Jones survived this change in attitude towards disco, becoming a hybrid figure of punk/new-wave/avant-garde music in the 1980s.

[213] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 152. Significantly, Jones also muses that the fall of disco had at least something to do with how "the essential racism, sexism, and homophobia of the white rock audience [had] forced it out of the way, which was easier to do when it became so crass and commercial." (205). Jones's own understanding of the downfall of disco therefore aligns with Frank's and Lawrences's understanding of these same cultural processes.

[214] Tim Lawrence elegantly elaborates on what Jones claims in the above note, and explains that this process of disco falling out of favor was much more antagonistic than it was merely a seamless evolution of cultural taste. He states that "White versus black, straight versus gay, male versus female, brain versus body – all of these age-old contests were finding their freshest articulation within the increasingly trenchant conflict between rock and disco," and that such a conflict was incredibly aggressive in how the rock audiences and cultural producers pushed for this anti-disco (and therefore anti-black and anti-gay) sentiment. Lawrence (and Gillian Frank, as well) points out that *Punk* magazine was a major source of this vitriol, where John Holmstrom of *Punk* magazine pleads with disco fans to "'Kill yourself. Jump off a fuckin' cliff. Drive nails into your head…Anything. Just don't do disco shit. I've seen that canned crap take real live people and turn them into dogs! … The epitome of all that's wrong with Western Civilization is disco.'" See Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 220-221.

Blue, and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer From the Dance*, which was the NYC that propelled Jones to fame as a disco queen, and which was full of queerness—sex workers, drag queens, weirdos, porn theaters, drug cultures, and an ample opportunity for interclass and intercultural 'contact.'[215] This gritty queer urban world was strategically unraveled by the economic and political forces within NYC that introduced the 'broken windows' policy of policing, the redevelopment of Times Square, and the displacement of both porn theaters/shops *and* local businesses as a result of unchecked declarations of eminent domain. These changes became the victory cups for politicians like Rudy Giuliani, who were eager to take credit for making NYC a 'better place' in the 1990s, and who were mostly unsympathetic to the queer subcultures that were being scoured.[216] Gay as a signifier came to blows against a more protean queerness as NYC became a gay tourist destination, while at the same time the queer dynamics of the city had been drastically altered due to a generation of people lost to AIDS, and the aforementioned political and spatial changes brought to Manhattan. When the waves of neoliberalism water down a historically gritty queer community into a gay community that resembles Lisa Duggan's 'homonormativity,' what does it mean, for Grace Jones to reemerge at a moment when these forces of normativity have so firmly planted themselves in the place that helped to establish her? One could read Jones's final performance in Roseland Ballroom in 2012 as an 'end of an era' show, and in some ways it is, as the venue itself shut its doors not long after, with its final act being Lady Gaga.[217] We can even read Gaga's honor of being Roseland's final act as a

[215] See John Rechy, *City of Night (*New York: Grove Press, 1984, c1963). See also
and Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
[216] See Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Press Release - Mayor Giuliani Cleaned Up New York City," *The American Presidency Project*. July 18, 2007; Charles Bagli, "Mayor Claims Credit for Times Sq. Revival," *The New York Times.* January, 2000; and William J. Stern, "The Truth About Times Square," *Institute for Justice*. April 21, 2009.
[217] The venue itself has a rich history of hosting explicitly queer events/parties, notably the annual Black Party, for those queer leather/fetish enthusiasts.

confirmation of the arrival of late capitalism in New York, 'Born This Way' gay politics, and the shuttering of historically queer spaces. However, what does a performer like Jones give us access to despite all of this? What is written on her body that remains, reemerges, and draws queerness to it?

Up To The Bumper

***At maybe 11 o'clock in the evening on October 27th, 2012, I found myself waiting at the stage door of Roseland Ballroom. Grace Jones's much anticipated *Return to Roseland* concert had just ended. I was in attendance. Myself and an acquaintance were both stalking the stage door in the hopes that we might get a chance to see Miss Jones. I had already been in front row for the concert, had already been physically touched by Jones in the course of the show, but we nonetheless waited outside for the opportunity to meet, chat, compliment, fawn, ask her to sign an inappropriate part of my body, whatever. Two young men were walking down the sidewalk approaching the few of us fans gathered by the stage door, and they asked, "Who are you waiting for?" Someone in the group of fans responded that we were all waiting for Grace Jones. The puzzled young men asked what Jones had 'done' or 'been in.' A devotee of Jones listed her more mainstream claims to fame, such as James Bond's *A View To A Kill* or working with Andy Warhol and Keith Haring. The young men shrugged, obnoxiously proclaimed "Never heard of her!" and sauntered off into the night. To these seemingly 'normal dudes,' Grace Jones just wasn't someone important enough to know of. This interaction always reminds me of the importance that divas have to queers and those who are 'in the know.' In another sense, this anecdote mirrors what José Esteban Muñoz claims in *Cruising Utopia*, that after exiting a profoundly queer experience, one is 'shocked' when confronted with a return to the blasé-ness of

the heteronormative world.[218] That is, after experiencing such a queer and intense performative spectacle, it is palpably confusing to encounter those who have no interest, curiosity, or stakes in the theatrical world we just exited. Usefully, though, Muñoz also suggests that such intense states of queerness leave a trace – they haunt and linger into the future.[219] What kinds of traces has Grace Jones left upon her audience? How can we estimate the ways in which her performing body lingers and revisits queer communities over the last several decades?***

34 years after Jones's performance at Roseland Ballroom in 1978, she makes a curious return to this performance venue, seemingly for kicks, as this show was not associated with an album tour like her 2009 *Hurricane Tour*. What is similar, though, in this 2012 show to her earlier performance at Roseland in 1978, is her explicit engagement with and eroticization of whiteness, making it consumable to her. She also pleasurably plays into the expectations her audience has for her to be erratic, chaotic, or 'messy.' Repeatedly during the show, she missed her cues, forgot the words to her songs, mocked her sound and lighting crew, and even performed the wrong encore to end her show. As an example of such defying of performative polish, while she performed her hit, "Pull Up to the Bumper," Jones emerges wearing a large yellow smiley-face mask that covers her entire face,[220] a horse tail protruding from her ass, and is wielding a riding crop. Jones playfully smacks the stage with her riding crop while crooning

[218] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 39.
[219] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 40-48.
[220] Jones's use of masks in this show, e.g. the smiley face mask, a green geometric diamond, the draped hood, all obscure her face in fashionable ways, but in this act of covering her face with synthetic materials or fabric, I am reminded of Anne Cheng's extended study of the performer Josephine Baker, who many have compared Jones to. Cheng, in speaking to how blackness as a signifier morphs through unpredictable aesthetic processes of dehumanization, explains that "When aesthetic history meets the history of human bodies made inhuman, what we will confront may not be an account of how modern surface represses or makes a spectacle of racialized skin but, instead, an intricate and inchoative narrative about how the inorganic dreams itself out of the organic and how the organic fabricates its essence through the body of the inanimate. This reciprocal narrative in turn will radically implode the distinction of surface versus essence so central to both racist and progressive narratives about the jeopardized black body." See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and The Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

"Pull up!" At this moment those of us in the front row begin to launch ourselves over the railing to get close enough for Jones to whip our hands or arms. Being out of reach, she climbs into the pit between the stage and audience and climbs atop the shoulders of a venue security guard. She then gives two commands: one is a gesture to her backup singers to carry on with the chorus; the other is a command for the white gay man next to me. She barks at him, "I want your ass!" The man in question does as told, and Jones begins wailing on his buttocks, to everyone's delight. Jones then directs another young white man in the audience to come with her, over the railing, and up on stage. They dance and grind with each other on stage while her backup singers are still going through the chorus of "Pull Up to the Bumper" (Jones has not resumed singing, herself, yet). Jones reaches her hand down the front of his pants, grabs his cock, and loudly proclaims "You've got a big one!" After ripping his shirt off and showing her prey to the audience, she commands the young man to go back stage and to acquire a glass of red wine for her. Jones is reversing the narrative all-too-frequently played out by white gay men: the fetishization of the black male body and a fascination with an allegedly large penis. Furthermore, Jones makes this young stud her servant, making him the 'lucky one' who has the privilege of serving her. What does this mean when white gay men want their divas to hurt them? Or, more specifically, what does it mean when white gay men eagerly embrace their humiliation in a 'State of Grace?'

Jones continues to play with her audience's desire in her *Return to Roseland* show by visually staging herself as a sacred and sublime other, absorbing, emitting, and consuming whiteness. As her well-known cover of the Roxy Music song "Love is the Drug" began, we hear a frantic synth line setting the tone of this performance as a frenzied one, all while Jones was herself wearing little other than a bejeweled bowler hat. The stage was completely dark, except for a solid, powerful, narrow, and pulsating beam of white light which was strategically aimed

directly downward onto Jones's glittering helmet. As she sings the song of sexual ecstasy, addiction, and pursuit, the lighting effect is startling. Jones's head is illuminated in a cloud of prismatic light. She resembles the biblical Theophany—the light of the divine showing its face on earth. She lifts her arms, placing her hands around the beam of white light—leaning back, she lets this radiant whiteness pour over her face while she opens her mouth and devours it. Here, Jones exceeded the normal parameters of embodiment, becoming sublime in a cloud of awe and immenseness.

Recalling Immanuel Kant's belief that the sublime is "that in comparison with which everything else is small."[221] In that moment, inhaling whiteness, Grace Jones was sublime, while those in the audience, myself included, felt rather insect-like in comparison. Fred Moten, in his reading of Frederic Jameson's questioning of what it would be like to consider the aesthetic or artistic project that we can't conceive of—the thing that is outside our ability to conceive of or create through representation. Moten claims that this new political and aesthetic strategy is what we need to reframe and remap the social world.[222] I propose that this thing is the sublime. At least part of how Moten theorizes blackness as existing 'in the break,' or in the cut, is that blackness functions as an ontological absence that is not empty. Both blackness and the sublime make themselves felt through shrieks and powerful images, and yet, it is without specific form– stretching beyond representation and into the void. It cannot be comprehended fully. And yet we feel it and know it. It is characterized as absent but is not empty. Jean Francois Lyotard, the most contemporary philosopher of the sublime, theorizes the sublime as the unresolvable differend within culture, discourse, and faculties of reason. It is the remainder that doesn't make sense, yet serves to define the rational through its mere difference. To Lyotard, even though the sublime as

[221] Kant, *Critique*, 108
[222] Moten, *In The Break*, 218-219.

differend never resolves or coheres into form, its beside-ness is deeply felt.[223] The remainder acts upon the rest that appears whole. It will consume you while you contemplate its existence.[224] Through Jones, the sublime remains, not wholly understood, inspiring terror, desire, and awe, reemerging time and again. Who can look away from the sublime? Why would we want to? We look back time and time again. Jones reverses the fearful parable described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, but instead of whiteness being afraid of the possibility of being eaten up by blackness, Jones *promises* a blackness that will consume you.[225] The queers and racialized subjects who pursue Jones are consumed by the queer sublime, and become changed by its intensity, bodily borders redrawn and reconceived in the process. We want to be consumed.

Jones seems to understand the mechanism of the sublime on stage, and what happens when one becomes otherworldly. Both queerness and blackness exist in the same ontological absences, spatial and choreographic disorientations, and affective excesses that characterize the sublime. The sublime is queerness and/or blackness exaggerated to the point of disbelief, awe, or ecstasy (perhaps all three). To Jones, it would appear that the sublime—figured as aesthetic and sensorial formlessness and hyperabundance—has a gravitational pull that draws subjects into its orbit. This gravitational pull brings subjects back to it, back to a moment of touch, of contact that lingers and reminds. In her memoir, while musing about the critiques levied against the organization of her live shows, she goes on a defiant tangent. She clearly understands her own strategy and legacy. She says that,

> If people complain that I am not doing enough of my old material, not performing all the hits, I will stand in front of them, a formlessness that engulfs all form. I will put on another hat, crack my whip, scatter fireflies, fix them with a five-thousand-year-old stare,

[223] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 234.
[224] The concept of Jones consuming her audience is explored more in Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 162-165, and in Jones's 2009 single, 'Corporate Cannibal,' where she sings, "I'll consume my consumers, with no sense of humour."
[225] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 114.

> fit to fight to the bitter end, becoming a ghost with the passage of time. I will be ready for my afterlife, for my bones to be buried in the mountains of Jamaica, or the canals of Venice, or the dark side of the moon, or under the ground of the cities I've lived in and loved. [226]

Jones has no plans to fade into obscurity; her fading will leave a mark, a bruise. When we read Jones here, we see that the sublime is not inert, not merely flash or sparkle—it does something. The formlessness of the sublime is a void that brings things into it, changing them. It 'engulfs all form,' consumes form and signification, giving Jones the ability to manipulate the power of spectacle, ultimately 'becoming a ghost with the passage of time.' This becoming ghost does not signal death as one might think, rather it heralds the beginning of her emerging queer legacy. In her career, Jones has often been moving towards the vanishing point as she becomes sublime—not meaning that she is moving towards irrelevance, rather that she is persistently moving towards the margins of intelligibility and new ways of being queerly embodied. She reflects in her memoir about how her performance work is always,

> exploring bodies, faces, settings, material, theater in the search for the sublime point—working in imaginary places, in cities not yet invented, with clothing not yet dreamed up, for impossible bodies, for a time that was neither daylight nor night, dream nor real, a twilight zone. // That was where I saw myself. Always in between, on the way to somewhere else. My head in the moment, but other parts of myself strewn across centuries and countries. I had always left myself open to movement and change.[227]

Like in her performance of "Love is the Drug," Grace is hyper-present, on stage, the ringleader in a production of sensory overload, and yet, she also seems *dis*embodied, ethereal, spirit— 'too much' to be possible. Again, the sublime is simultaneously *here* and *there*, occupying proximity and distance in the same moment. The above passage shows how Jones sees herself as moving between the material and sensory and into the potential that drives her work. Jones's use of the work sublime in the above passage is revealing. She speaks of the sublime as a 'point' that can

[226] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 380.
[227] Jones and Morley, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 204.

be reached if one digs deeper and deeper into cultural impossibilities and unintelligibilities, which I think are the borders of queerness and blackness, experimented with, and spoken into being on stage. Reaching the sublime point on stage is only possible if one 'digs deeper and deeper' into the muck of signification and representation.

In this same show at Roseland, near the end of her set, Jones sings her signature song "Slave to the Rhythm." The most important visual and performative detail during this performance of "Slave…" is that she is hula-hooping throughout the entirety of the song.[228] Though one might be tempted to write this off as Jones performing a cheap parlor trick, a throwaway circus talent, I ask for closer attention. If part of Jones's performative ethos is to repurpose the most shameful conceptions of blackness that circulate, then I think we can read her defiant hula-hooping as a similar repurposing. How often are black bodies littered throughout cultural texts as one-liners, or sideshows that are never really given the same depth and purpose as their white counterparts? Pairing durational hula-hooping with a starburst haute couture Philip Treacy hat, all while singing a song whose lyrics depict the endless struggle of workers and people of color, creates an unusual and effective juxtaposition. The song leads up to its inevitable crescendo, where Jones assumes the voice of a theatrical announcer, singing "…And now, ladies and gentlemen, here's…….GRACE! [sotto voce] Slave, to the rhythm."

Perhaps it is more useful to think of this ending as an entrance —announcing herself proudly at the end of a song whose lyrics tell a tale of struggle. It is worth noting that the song 'Slave…' was originally intended for Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and Jones's final announcement was obviously only added after her production team acquired it for her hands.

[228] In recent years, this has become somewhat of a trademark of hers, famously hula-hooping to this song during Queen Elizabeth II's Jubilee concert in London, UK. A full reading and interpretation of her performing this song for the Monarch of an Empire is tempting, but beyond the scope of this project right now.

With this in mind, the significance of Jones's theatrical and climactic announcement of self begins to make itself clear as a unique statement about Jones herself. I propose that we read her "Here's Grace!" through an Austinian lens, and think of it as a performative utterance that actually speaks blackness into existence on stage.[229] Although one might be tempted to read "Here's Grace!" as a constantive utterance, i.e. an utterance that is merely descriptive, true or false in nature, describing her position (Here I am!), I think that we *must* read "Here's Grace!" as a performative. This utterance doesn't quite make sense as a constantive because her position, on stage or in song, is already clear throughout the performance—we are either already seeing/listening to her perform on stage or listening to her song in another space. There is no 'big reveal' that comes with her announcement. The central component of Austin's treatise on performative utterances is that the uttering of the verb actually performs its own action (e.g. 'I marry thee'), when the utterance is performed under accepted circumstances, spoken by the accepted party, and performed/received in a generally accepted way and manner.[230] In the case of Jones and 'Slave…', her "Here's Grace!" breaks down into "Here *is* Grace*!*", where the verb is *is*, making a statement about *being*. In case this all sounds superfluous, consider: 1. The whole apparatus of the song and her performance of it is creating the conditions by which she can authoritatively make a performative that both she and the audience can find felicitous, and 2. A performative about *being* uttered and announced by a performer of blackness and queerness opens up possibilities for black and queer embodiment through performance. A performative utterance which announces that blackness can have *being*, or ontological heft, is significant given that Fanon in outlines the precarious position of blackness as one that is constantly struggling to

[229] J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5-9.
[230] Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 32-38.

maintain any kind of ontological status that is not merely the flip-side or absence of whiteness.[231] Jones, in this performance and in this song generally, aligns herself with Fanon, who rejects the theoretical apparatuses that have made it so difficult for blackness to emerge into subjectivity, simply claiming that "My negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*."[232] Jones's utterance, then, becomes political in a new vein, since 'Here's Grace!' implies that Grace *is*, that she is not an object, not an absence, but a material being. Here is queerness and blackness, on stage, sublime.

Jones's hit, "Slave to the Rhythm," was *supposed* to be her final song and encore. What better way to mark a grand finale than with the song's dramatic announcement of "Here's Grace!"? However, Jones's own erratic nature, pleasurably disorganized performance style, and perhaps a few glasses of wine caused her to mistake the order of her set list. As she reached the *actual* end of her show, she realized that she forgot to perform the title track from her last album, "Hurricane," which was assumedly meant to be performed soon before "Slave to the Rhythm." Though her band and backup singers all-but-rolled their eyes, Jones performed "Hurricane" as her unplanned encore for the show, posturing before a large fan as her hood and cape filled with air, making her presence fill a larger and larger piece of the stage. The significance of "Hurricane" as the accidental encore of the concert is twofold. One, we see Jones going *back* to performing the airy formlessness of the sublime after such a profound and important ontological announcement of being in hulu-hooping through "Slave to the Rhythm." Two, this return to formlessness and the sublime seem to come at an oddly coincidental, and violent, cost. Late that night, Hurricane Sandy descended upon New York City, disabling it for days and causing unprecedented destruction in a city unaccustomed to such 'acts of god.' While I am certainly not

[231] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 109-112.
[232] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 135.

seriously claiming that Grace Jones summoned a hurricane onto NYC, it does make one wonder about how the sublime likewise functions as a 'force of nature.' Returning to Lyotard, we find that "Sublime violence is like lightning. It short-circuits thinking with itself. Nature, or what is left of it, quantity, serves only to provide the bad contact that creates the spark."[233] We only encounter mysteries when we reach the end of our faculties to comprehend. Nature, here, is what we know and are familiar with. This creates the 'bad contact' that sparks the possibility that the sublime might emerge and go beyond the familiarity of the rational, reasonable everyday. A rainstorm is a kind of nature that is everyday; a hurricane is sublime, incomprehensible in its power to destroy. Jones, too, takes the narratives and exaggerations of race and queerness that seem 'natural,' and uses them as the 'bad contact' by which she can become other, become sublime, and break our understandings of what these narratives and images and sounds of race and queerness might mean.

What Remains

Some sounds never really dissipate—they reverberate and vibrate across time into unpredictable futures. Sounds and feelings linger, if there are people to remember them or discover them. Sounds and songs connect us to how we perceive and understand space, in acoustic reverberations and echoes. In the days of disco, when sounds and bodies harmonized, queerness itself was not only given a physical space and stage, but given an animating force – a queer affect that circulated and danced. In *Dancer from the Dance*, Andrew Holleran's classic novel about the gay disco scene of the 1970s in New York City, we see this animating force emerge and become sublime at the cueing of a song. Holleran here describes the early hours of

[233] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 54.

the morning at the discotheque, when the dancing and cruising queers catch a second wind when a recognizable pop tune is injected onto the dance floor:

> There was a moment when their faces blossomed into the sweetest happiness… when they took off their sweat-soaked T-shirts and screamed because Patty Joe [sic] had begun to sing: 'Make me believe in you, show me that love can be true.' By then, the air was half-nauseating with the stale stench of poppers, broken and dropped on the floor after their fumes had been sucked into the heart…The people on downs were hardly able to move, and the others rising from couches where they had been sprawled like martyrs who have given up their souls to Christ pushed onto the floor and united in the cries of animal joy because Patty Joe [sic] had begun to sing in her metallic, unreal voice… [234]

Like sorcery, the diva and discotheque were able to animate the melancholic queers into states of drug-addled ecstasy, repeated lyrics becoming incantations of hope for a pleasure that might remain. Again, the sublime awakening here distorted the boundaries between "I" and "you," creating a sweat stained union of bodies in motion—a terrain of 'we' or 'us.' The sublime rises, reaches a crescendo, and crashes back. This process of rising and coming together, preceded and followed by isolation and falling apart is the very mechanism of disco, as described by Gregory Bredbeck. In his reading of *Dancer from the Dance*, Bredbeck explains this seemingly contradictory process as follows: "The disco provides an illusion of place and embodiment, something tangible that can, either then or now, ameliorate and facilitate the fleetingness of the identity dance by providing a particularized site for identification."[235] What disco brought was the possibility for Grace Jones to become a queerly black spectacle that audiences could dance to, with, while forming pleasurable identifications with each other, and with Jones herself. The pleasure of the sublime, the ecstatic moment, ends or fades, but its memory, and its pursuit drives bodies to move and remember. In fact, the return of Patti Jo's "Make Me Believe In You" at the final party scene of the novel is what sparks a remembrance of pleasures past and catalyzes the

[234] Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (New York: Morrow, 1978), 39.
[235] Bredbeck, "Troping the Light Fantastic," 102.

return of the sublime.[236] To Sutherland and Malone, they were consumed by the overwhelming pleasure and pain of the sublime, and never danced again.

Popular music archives itself not only in radio playlists and record collections, but in the more evasive domain of cultural memory. Holleran's picture of disco is one where queerness itself is finding and feeling itself through new intensities. Though he couldn't have predicted in 1978 the AIDS epidemic and its devastation to the subculture he writes of, there is a sense that something endures, even if his main protagonists, Malone and Sutherland, do not. The narrating figures of the novel, who correspond back and forth, containing the story within a reminiscing dialogue, will perhaps never forget Malone, Sutherland, or those moments of mindless pleasure and heartbreak—even if one of them has moved to the countryside *to try* to forget. What does it mean, then, for Jones to return, 34 years later, to an old space of ecstatic stomping and movement, like Patti Jo reminding Sutherland and Malone of an all-consuming pleasure? What histories or pleasures does Jones bring back to her audience? A diva can always bring you back to the dance floor – her song, her voice can always lead you to a new feeling or a place of belonging and ecstasy. The legacy and the precedent Jones was setting in the late 1970s is incredibly important, even decades later in her 'Return to Roseland' performance, this legacy is being simultaneously indexed, invoked, and reimagined. Though she continued developing her reputation as an avant-garde, in-your-face performer throughout the early 1980s, her legacy as a disco diva is enmeshed with the excess and exuberance of the era. Queers still resonate with and seek that trace. During her 2012 performance, Jones asks the audience if anyone was at the Roseland 1978 show, and several dozen hands rose. There's something significant in this early 21st century moment, where even though the forces of late capitalism are homogenizing and

[236] Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 229.

flattening out these important queer subcultural spaces, figures like Jones remain as reminders of resistance to and against this tide of normativity. As she negotiated her own body on stage in such a way that preserved its defiant blackness and queerness, she similarly asks her audience to preserve its own queerness and/or blackness. New York City is showing no signs of returning to an era where there were more spaces of interclass or interracial contact that Delany reminisces about, or that disco explored, but the fact that Jones returned to Roseland reminds a queer constituency that queerness is still here, was here, and, if sought, will endure.

The mess of queerness and the pursuit of the sublime can never truly be stomped out, even if Roseland Ballroom itself has now been shuttered to make room for luxury apartments in midtown Manhattan[237]. That idea of making the impossible possible on stage, or vice versa, was something that could happen at the discotheque. Jones lives that legacy and brings the chaos and pleasure of the disco into the future—transforming divas into complex figures that herald new affective terrains for how queerness can be sensed or felt. The affective collaboration between diva and audience is what allows queerness to remain, and what allows Jones to stay eminent within queer circles, even among a gamut of other disco divas. Jones is *not* giving the audience exactly what they want or expect; she is, after all, an unapologetic 'freak,' a 'mess' who certainly doesn't fit into the narrative of respectability or assimilation. Grace is performing unpredictability itself, performing the abject position of blackness while simultaneously staging all of its possibilities and limitless potentials through the queer sublime. She prevents queerness from crystalizing into a legibility that reads as a simple 'gay.' Jones points us to the best and most productive ways that divas invoke sublimity to reform the terrain of queerness. Her example is one that encourages divas to become unhinged, a little 'off,' a bit weird. Queer.

[237] See Steve Weinstein, "Does Roseland Ballroom's Demise End the Era of the Manhattan Megaclub?" *The Village Voice*, April 2014.

Chapter 3

Downgraded Whiteness – The Campy Sublime of Kylie Minogue

In this dissertation about diva performance of the long twentieth century in the United States, choosing to discuss the campy Australian 'pop princess' Kylie Minogue might seem like an unusual choice. Admittedly, Minogue may not be the most influential or important diva in a pantheon of performers in the 20th century US musical world. Outside of the United States, though, Minogue holds a lofty position in pop-royalty, filling stadium-sized concert venues across every continent (except North America), such that 'Kylie' is simply a household name that evokes cheesy teenage soap opera stardom and catchy, danceable pop tunes. However, *Out Magazine* described her relationship to the United States in 2010 as follows: "But to most Americans -- the straight ones, anyway -- she is only vaguely familiar, a name they can't quite put with a face but with whom they feel they might have once shared a brief, bright moment years ago."[238] It's this perpetual outsider status which Minogue wears in an American context that gestures towards her contributions to our understanding of the queerness of divas. It is also this outsider status which firmly roots her in queer subcultures in the US; Minogue is a diva to those 'in the know,' and on the peripheries of taste. But I focus on Minogue in this chapter not so that I may argue for how important she is or how important she should be, but rather that Minogue's continual misplacement within an American milieu is what makes her worthy of conversation. Why *has* Minogue never quite achieved the success of her other white diva counterparts like Madonna or Lady Gaga (aside from the managerial and business explanations,

[238] See Noah. Michelson, "Crazy for Kylie," *Out Magazine*, Aug 2010, 64.

where Minogue was consistently cautioned against performing and marketing in the US)?[239] What is so unusual about Kylie?

To Ben Ratliff, reviewing a 2009 performance at the Hammerstein Ballroom in NYC, Minogue's displacement within the American imaginary "boils down to Europop's absolute foreignness: there is no Bronx in it. Minogue naturally circumvents the dark parts of desire… [she is] edgeless, posing no threat or subtext [,] … no heavy message. … though you have an apparent advantage in connecting with it if you're a gay man."[240] Ratliff suggests that this lack 'edgelessness' is tantamount to a lack of substance, 'no heavy message.' So, this critique of Minogue rings rather similar to the familiar critiques of camp—which paint it as an aesthetic practice that is all surface, with no *deeper* meaning or signification. Relatedly, Ratliff notices the adoration of Minogue by gay or queer men but doesn't really seem to know what to do with it. What's clear is that Ratliff has no sense of the importance that divas and their 'edgeless' music play to queer communities (here gay men), and how camp and the divas one chooses to identify with become a subtle language of taste and gesture that communicates queerness in a heteronormative world. Ratliff's statement that there's 'no Bronx in' Minogue's performance is also a racialized one. What Ratliff unwittingly points us to in this review is the camp in Minogue's style of performance tells us a great deal about queerness, race, and how we expect divas to engage with those positions. So, Ratliff subtly implies that what's lacking from Minogue's performance which bears 'no Bronx' in it, is that it is devoid of a connection to blackness or brownness. This is an odd criticism, considering that in this show, Minogue not only sampled Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," but also performed a new arrangement of her cover of "Locomotion," which was originally recorded by the 1960s pop singer Little Eva. The

[239] Simon Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie* (London: Titan Books, 2012), 272.
[240] See Ben Ratliff, "Coming in for a Landing After All These Years," *The New York Times,* Oct. 14, 2009.

fact remains, though, that Minogue is white, and differently white than that of an American performer like Madonna who has historically siphoned off of communities of color to present herself as edgy, cultured, or authentic.[241] But how can this be? How can Minogue *not be* siphoning off of black musicians when she regularly gestures to, and samples black artists from disco, soul, and electro-pop? Ratliff's review importantly betrays a curiosity, or bewilderment for Minogue's performance of whiteness that doesn't rest on an American narrative of whiteness which obscures itself in through an ethos of success, struggle, or heavy-handed artistic statement. His review of her "For You, For Me" concert in NYC allows us to see precisely *why* Minogue belongs in a conversation of divas in the United States, even though she seems to be a 'foreigner.' It makes sense, then, that Ratliff reads Minogue as 'foreign,' not only because of her queer electro-pop sensibilities that always hearken back to disco (and more recently, Europe), but also because of the way Minogue inhabits and performs whiteness parodically and farcically. Minogue inhabits whiteness differently than a white American diva might, because her version of whiteness is not built from taking the contributions of black culture as a way to merely seem 'cool.' This is because Minogue never precisely reaches 'cool' status; she is campy, awkward, too much, not enough. Her covers and samples from black artists never make her 'cool,' and they are never presented as her discoveries.

Because of these differences and others, the story of this chapter will inevitably unfold differently. Minogue's relationship and history with US-based performance venues—and American queers—is spottier than some of the other performers in this dissertation. What is most germane to this analysis, though, is what Minogue is able to do—or not able to do—with the mantle of whiteness. It appears that Minogue is always uncomfortably wearing it, and it shows. It

[241] See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

is not that Minogue throws off the mantle of whiteness that has been produced for her, but rather that she distorts it through amplification and excess. To make this claim, I will choose select performances from Minogue's early and later career, tracing a trajectory of camp across her 30-year career, continually noting the places where seriousness fails, sometimes spectacularly. I will first discuss Minogue's 2009 performance at the Hammerstein Ballroom in NYC, and in addition I will discuss Minogue's early music video work, the promotional performances for her 2010 album *Aphrodite* in a NYC gay bar, and her 2011 "Les Folies/Aphrodite" tour, which was adapted and scaled-down for smaller venues in the US and other locales. Reading these performances through the lens of both aesthetic philosophy, camp, and critical race theory, I illustrate the way that Minogue's campy sublime always performs what I call 'downgraded whiteness.' Downgraded whiteness is a kind of whiteness that always fails to perform itself in the 'serious,' naturalized way regular whiteness perpetuates its own victories and centrality. Downgraded whiteness is strange and deliberately fantastical, making whiteness itself seem farcical and distant. And a discussion of downgraded whiteness through Minogue is particularly salient in a US context, because of the way that white divas in the US frequently rely on black or brown bodies to augment or amplify their own performance styles to be read as more authentic and 'edgy.'

Touching Down – The Coming of the Campy Sublime

The Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City is a venue with a storied history, one that *attempted to* court—with some brief success—all the great divas of opera in the early 1900s.[242]

[242] Later, the venue suffered financial difficulties and was eventually rebranded as a mutable multipurpose space, catering to corporate meetings or music acts not requiring the grandeur of Carnegie Hall or Madison Square Garden. See Edward Wong, "Cultures Clash Where Divas Once Held Stage," *The New York Times,* May 16, 2000.

In a manner of speaking, it was the stage where high culture once failed, and subculture goes to perform, making it appropriate for the arrival of the diva who holds the focus of this chapter—a diva whose own ethos is that of downgraded whiteness. And on October 12, 2009, around 9pm, a line of fans stretched around the block began to enter the Hammerstein Ballroom, and eventually filled the space to near its 3500-person capacity. At the diva's moment of arrival, a showtunes medley begins playing, giving way to the familiar, yet modified synth beats of Donna Summer's disco hit "I Feel Love,"[243] sampled as the sonic introduction to Kylie Minogue's song "Light Years." Nearly 3500 voices screamed in deafening unison—she had arrived. When the curtains opened, prismatic lasers and smoke launched into the venue space, preparing the audience for landing. A monument-sized chrome skull began to descend, ostensibly coming from outer-space (See Figure 3). Atop this shining skull rode Minogue, wearing a Jean Paul Gautier geometrically shaped silver space-corset, sky-high platform shoes, jeweled greaves, and sparkling planets orbiting her head.[244] The stage was graced by dancers in form-fitting gun-metal spacesuits, with opaque helmets, who lined up to raise their arms and receive Minogue from her shimmering skull. Her message is a command and an entreaty: *"Listen can you hear that distant calling // Far away but will be with you soon // Rocket into to outer space in orbit // Take us to the pop stars on the moon // …Travel in Light Years*." This was Minogue's moment to appear, the lyrics to "Light Years" signal to her shrieking (yet noticeably non-teenage) audience that the journey is not yet over, even though she is the diva who has just arrived. Importantly, this small, six-city tour, titled "For You, For Me," was also the first time that Minogue had toured in the United States throughout her entire decades-long career, as she had been previously advised of the

[243] This sampling of "I Feel Love" already signals Minogue's symbolic commitment to the legacy of disco, particularly the legacies of pleasure and queerness.
[244] An imperfect, yet complete version of the October 13th 2009 performance has been documented here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9EMYDUc1Kg

financial risk and the technical difficulties in 'scaling back' her usually excessive theatrics. In so deciding to do this tour, Minogue accepted an inevitable financial loss, which immediately helps to frame the performance through the lens of failure.[245]. She ostensibly went through with this tour just for 'the fun of it.' This *late* arrival to her American fan base, consisting of mostly queer folks, explains the frenzied anticipation and explosive response to seeing Minogue land from her glittering cranial spacecraft on an American stage. Certainly, part of this comes from the building anticipation in her audience at the possibility of her arrival, 'Is she really here? Kylie? Finally!' Doubt follows, perhaps anxiety, and an affective and sensory fullness upon seeing Minogue arrive at last. It's no surprise that a queer audience will scream for their diva, but what does Minogue's arrival bring to her American audience? What is the legacy or aesthetic tradition that she participates in that caused such an ecstatic response? The answers are simple, she is the camp diva par excellence.

Minogue's lyrics from 'Light Years,' sung during the opening of her "For You, For Me" tour, 'listen can you hear the distant calling // far away but will be with you soon," suggest both the coming arrival of divas, but also a religious calling of diva-worship that is coming to fulfillment, with divine forces responding to our longing to see the "pop stars on the moon," the place away from *here* where we might find our divas. Divas are themselves otherworldly, as Minogue's mission in this concert is to transport her audience into the ecstasy and joy that queerness and camp can bring. Josh Kun suggests that pop music has the capacity to take us

[245] Minogue described her rationale for going forward with the tour despite the financial risks as, "It was like… setting my wallet on fire because basically it just made no financial sense to do it, but I just reached a point where I thought, 'That's it! I just wanna!'" See Adam Markovitz, "Kylie Minogue talks about her new tour, her craziest outfits, and Paula Abdul," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 9, 2009.

away, to gesture towards utopian possibilities while we live under the strictures of hegemony.[246] Minogue then is unwittingly referring to a queerness that propels us away from here.

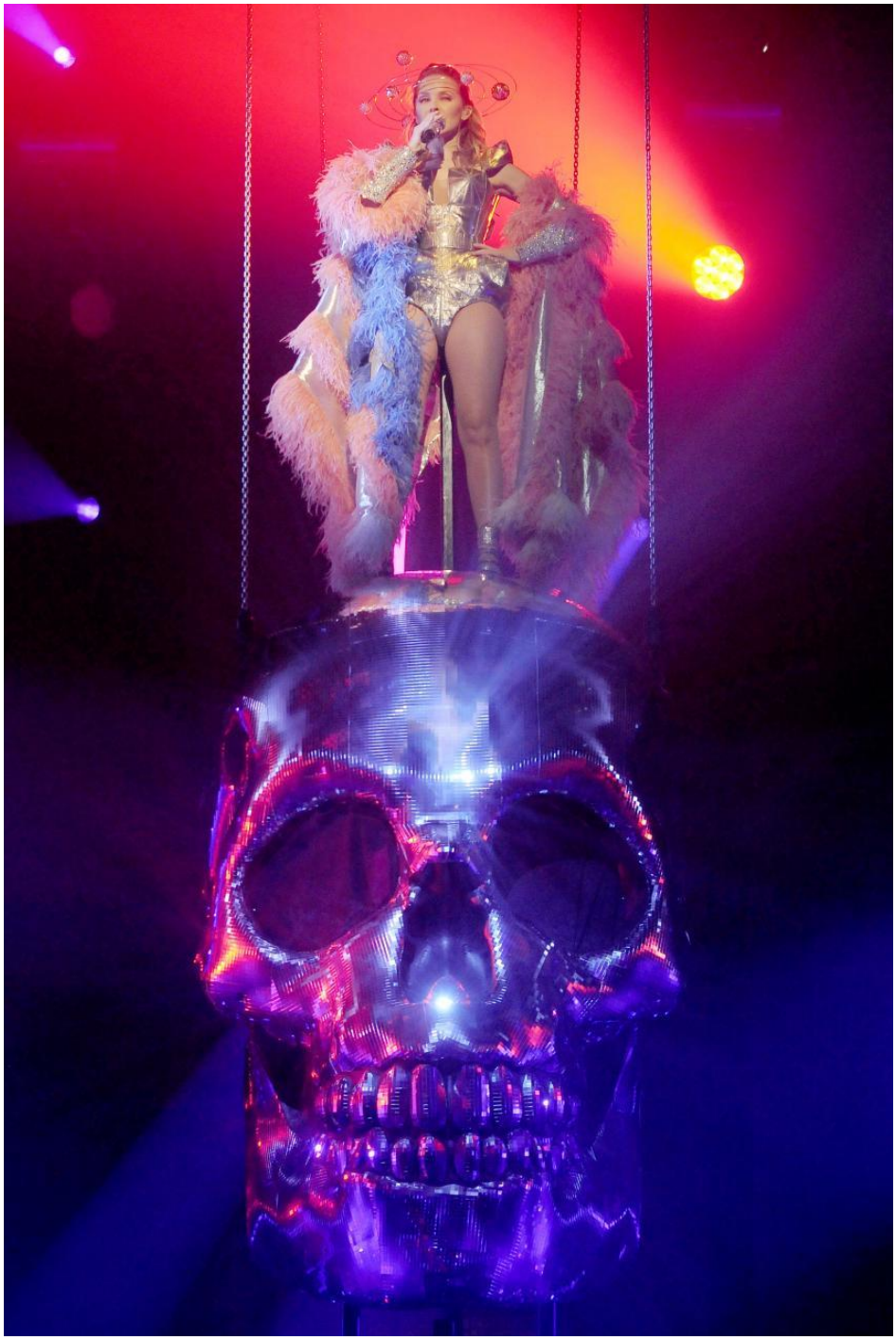


Figure 3 - Kylie Minogue performing "Light Years" during her "For You, For Me" North American tour.

[246] See Kun, *Audiotopia*, 2-3.

These cultural feelings of anticipation and dissatisfaction with the "here and now" are particularly queer affects which hearken back to the words of José Esteban Muñoz, who states that queerness itself always has its eye on the horizon, waiting for the opportunity to depart the soggy now for the promising then and there. The ecstasy in which the audience exploded upon seeing and hearing Minogue also marks what Muñoz would call 'ecstatic time,' which "is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure…Opening oneself up to such a perception of queerness as manifestation in and of ecstatic time offers queers much more than the meager offerings of pragmatic gay and lesbian politics."[247] Muñoz is saying that moments of ecstasy and enrapture are alternatives to the thrusts of normativity which rely on the logics of liberal politics that enshrine and crystalize identity. That is, the joys and ecstatic pleasures of a campy sublime are much deeper than the critics of camp may like to admit. Beneath the surface of enjoyment and pleasure, we find an aesthetic field of play and critique. In other words, camp is never only joy, pleasure, or ecstasy—these are only the interfaces through which critique or possibility are conveyed. So, when an audience has an ecstatic response to Minogue's campy sublime, at least part of this ecstasy is in Minogue's exuberant performance of a whiteness that is downgraded and eccentric. The spectacle of her show is entrancing, dizzying, and somehow sacred in its intensity. Minogue's sublime is rightfully a campy one, and it is this combination of perhaps two unexpected aesthetic sensibilities/experiences—camp and the sublime—which helps to explain this perpetual, residual 'otherness' that lingers in Minogue's otherwise white, ordinary pop-stardom. Minogue's performance of camp dips into multiple Kantian aesthetic taxonomies; camp might appear more like the beautiful at the outset, but reeks of the sublime. And the sublime always—overtly or

[247] See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 32.

covertly—indexes difference. Divas have the ability to craft an aesthetic terrain about race and queerness that changes the parameters of those bodily and embodied forms. The sublime may index difference itself, but the reminder that Minogue brings to us in her model of divadom is that difference itself is aesthetically porous and mutable.

Kantian aesthetic categories find trouble in defining Minogue. In reading Minogue through his early treatise, *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime*, neither she nor her performances seem to match up with how "The sublime must be simple, the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented."[248] Certainly Minogue's descent from the ceiling of the Hammerstein Ballroom *moves*, and brings with it a sense of overwhelming awe; yet, Minogue also charms with her girl-next-door, friendly approachability (as distinct from Madonna's austere seriousness). Her grand entrance on top of a skull-turned-spacecraft is already awe-inducing and over the top, while Minogue's song 'Light Years' deliberately and humorously confounds the grandeur of this entrance, explaining as a flight-attendant might "Greetings, my name is Kylie … The exits are located in the front and the rear of the craft." Her sublimity on stage is always subject to caveat, unlike the sublime evoked by Grace Jones, whose performances on stage seem powerful, absolute. Minogue's sublime, on the other hand, is always a little ridiculous or silly. Minogue revels in the adornment of a large-scale performance production, and within a Kantian paradigm this would mark it as beautiful and not sublime.[249] It would seem as though Minogue defies an easy classification into either the sublime or the beautiful, yet her performances carry aspects of both. This is because camp—Minogue's central performative tenet—is a queer aesthetic practice that productively disrupts a Kantian aesthetic taxonomy. Minogue's camp inhabits that same disrupted in-between space between goodness and badness in almost the same

[248] Kant, *Observations,* 47-48.
[249] Kant, *Observations,* 48-49.

way that she straddles both the beautiful and the sublime. Thus, this straddling between the beautiful and the sublime points us to a place where Minogue—through camp—queers the sublime in its evocation. And it is camp that inspires the investment in the unique kind of sublime that Minogue evokes. Camp helps us place Minogue within a larger conversation about divas. Camp is theatrical, always or most often connected to queer subcultural aesthetics, and it also often tells us something about the aesthetics and erotics of race. Minogue's contribution to our understanding of divas and the pursuit of the queer sublime is centered on the connection between her whiteness and her role as a camp diva.

Minogue stands out within my larger project, perhaps most notably because she is the only white diva in my archive (aside from the cursory discussions of Olive Fremstad in chapter 1) upon which I hold a sustained analysis. And this discussion of Minogue follows and continues certain conversations in my chapter on the performance legacy of Grace Jones but offers a different terrain through which to understand just how divas are signaling new forms of queerness and race in their sublime performances. Here I instead want to examine the ways that a white diva like Minogue is able to perform race and queerness in complex and productive ways that are apart from the oft-critiqued and exploitative racial and sexual dynamics of other white divas like Madonna. Some may ask why I choose to focus on Minogue, instead of Better Midler, who for instance, is a white, campy diva whose career as 'Bathhouse Betty' in the 1960s and 70s NYC was more exclusively tied to the underground queer nightlife and sexual cultures in a way that Minogue simply wasn't. What is Minogue's queer allure? Why devote a segment of this dissertation to a white Australian pop diva, whose success has always been scant from an American perspective, and who has always struggled to be taken seriously stateside? And how can such a globally 'mainstream' diva with an enormous budget be formative to the production

of queerness, as I'm claiming divas are? Haven't we come to expect grittier voices for the direction that queer culture takes? Rather, it is for precisely *these* questions, and these misfires in reception and success in the US, in distinction from how Minogue is received globally, that I find Minogue to be a compelling diva to discuss in the post-disco era. The accusations of being shlock, pop garbage, or 'edgeless' as Ratliff claimed, are important signifiers for how queerness is often represented through "The good taste of bad taste" in camp.[250] It is through these consistent accusations that one becomes a camp diva.

I contend that it is Minogue's status as a camp icon—and the way she performs whiteness that complicates her inclusion into an American pantheon of divas, and that which makes her ideal to discuss in my ongoing conversation about the queerness of divas. That is, Minogue's camp is almost 'too-campy' even for camp. Through all this though, the hyperabundance of Minogue's aesthetic style on stage allows her to reach the sensory overstimulation of the sublime *through* camp. Through Minogue, the queerness of camp becomes the sublime. This is both unusual and queer, because camp productively complicates and resonates with the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful—and so Minogue complicates this Kantian binary, as well. Perhaps more strangely, though, is the sense that Minogue can make us feel two things—camp and the sublime— that seem as though they should *not* go together. The sublime is something often lofty or otherworldly, and camp is something rather dazzlingly base and downgraded, such that David Halperin describes it as "a race to the bottom" of culture and taste.[251] Minogue's campy sublime is intimately connected to queer underworlds, and even though she occasionally found mainstream success in the US, her campiness precludes her from

[250] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 54.
[251] David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 191.

superstardom here. Unlike Madonna or Lady Gaga, the other obvious comparisons to Minogue, her downgraded whiteness doesn't fit an American narrative of race that can make her a consistently marketable pop culture product.

Do the Locomotion with Me, Or, I Should Be So Yucky

Shlock, garbage, fluff, shallow trash, sounds for the lowest common denominator; this is the reputation of the poppiest of pop music, and it carries a message similar to Judy Kutulas's claim that disco was merely presenting performance and sound as 'surface glitz.'[252] Pop music—particularly pop music of the top-40, teeny-bopper variety, is often reviled for its depthless artifice. Shortly after Grace Jones's career began to ebb in the late 1980s, and as the above statement indicates, Kylie Minogue arrived unplanned on the diva scene as a bubbly, bubble gum pop star.[253] She brought to both the UK and the US uber-cheesy teen-pop hits such as "Locomotion" and "I Should Be So Lucky." Though her role on the Australian soap "Neighbors" granted her a strong following across the non-American English-speaking world, it was the turn to music which launched her to greater fame, specifically by working with acclaimed UK-based hit-makers Stock Aitken Waterman. Even so, Minogue somewhat disappeared throughout the 1990s stateside. Here Minogue is the sole diva in my larger project who did not rise from the underground, subcultural realm of queerness, and yet her career stateside has been so widely inconsistent in its successes or reception at the mainstream level that she eventually found her way into performing within and to queer subcultures.[254] Though Minogue may have been

[252] Kutulas, "You Probably Think," 189.
[253] When her music career began, she was devoting much of her energy to her popular portrayal of Charlene on "Neighbors," which in retrospect is no less campy. See Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie*, 47-54.
[254] In June 2018, Minogue performed as the headliner for NYC Pride, which some may argue precludes her from having truly 'underground' status, but I tend to side with the opinion espoused in *Out Magazine* that Minogue's presence in gay/queer life does not translate into mainstream legibility in the larger heterosexual public sphere.

produced 'from above,' like camp, she becomes subcultural through the queer resignification process that camp entails. Likewise, camp allows us to see that whiteness itself is always produced from above, from the forces of capital and the culture industry that construct it into a product. Minogue's role in being a 'product' of Stock Aitken Waterman (SAW) is significant if we think about what pop music produces in terms of racial ideologies. SAW in particular, while creating hits for the famously trashy drag queen Divine, the glamourous and genderqueer Pete Burns of Dead or Alive, the unabashedly dopey Rick Astley, and of course, Kylie Minogue, were crafting a sonic landscape of eccentric whiteness in their oftentimes explicitly queer club music.[255] This 'shlock' music become the materials through which Minogue was able to craft a deceptively complex vision of divadom through surface-level aestheticization.[256] Through looking at SAW in the production of these other white weirdos, I see that the top-down model of producing performers is not necessarily a precluding fact to thinking about them as performing in aesthetically interesting or queer ways.[257]

[255] SAW member Pete Waterman said of their music in the 1980s "We make gay records. There's no question about that and we're not afraid to say it. … To keep peple dancing, you've got to have 'up' music, with lots of excitement and a heavy bass drum. The music I heard in those gay clubs was like that. Everyone was dancing. But…the records they were playing were cheap and nasty. I knew I could give them exactly what they wanted with quality." Additionally, SAW also frequently produced music for black artists, notably Donna Summer, Mel & Kim, and Latoya Jackson. See Mark Elliot, *The Ministry of Pop: The Stock Aitken Waterman Story* (London: Flood Gallery Publishing, 2016), 16.

[256] Being 'deceptively complex' could be part of how musical pleasure is sensorially processed and understood. In his analysis of musical pleasure and complexity, Nicholas Hudson compares Beethoven to Kylie Minogue's "I Should Be So Lucky" in order to explain how Minogue's pop music—in its digital form—is often difficult to compress, and contains a surprisingly large amount of musical and sonic data. He goes on to surmise, if simply, "that Classical music is apparently complex but really simple, while Popular music is apparently simple but really complex." See Nicholas J. Hudson, "Musical beauty and information compression: Complex to the ear but simple to the mind?" *BMC Research Notes* 4, no. 1 (January 2011): 5.

[257] The success of this SAW model of making music, one that began with a group of superstar music producers, inspired a strong backlash from DJs and listeners. Mike Stock, while he and the rest of SAW were attending the Disco Mix Club Awards, notes a hostile response from the audience, stating that, "As we got on stage, all three of us got pelted – I even got a can of urine thrown over me." It is unclear from this recollection, or from Mark Elliot's comprehensive recording history of SAW, whether this aggressive response was a particular feeling from DJs at losing power over the production of music scenes, or whether it was just an impassioned enactment of "The general world view .. that SAW was fluff or manufactured pap [sic]." See Elliott, *The Ministry of Pop*, 63, 67.

A closer look into Minogue's emergence into the world of music begins with a recording of the Carole King and Gerry Goffen written "Loco-motion," which was originally recorded and made famous in the US by Little Eva in 1962.[258] SAW released a re-produced version of the song in 1988 to the UK and US, with an accompanying video that featured a frizzy haired Minogue dancing stiffly with other teenage fashionistas of the eighties. But following the success of Locomotion, and after a few hit singles in between, Minogue recorded "Hand on Your Heart"—also produced by SAW—in 1989, with an intensely awkward music video released alongside it. While the song is rather unremarkable in its catchiness about a dying love-affair, the video is remarkable in Minogue's own discomfort and lackadaisical enthusiasm. Minogue is styled in a 1950s-esque hairdo of loose waves, with form fitting tight dresses of alternating blue, yellow, and red, with a contrasting color heart crudely stitched onto the dress. The scenery of the video is a confusing landscape of mirrors, striped pillars, chairs, and statue busts, a kind of garbage display through which Minogue is ambling through slowly, almost puzzled. Her expressions barely cover the boredom and dissatisfaction with the video's concept and execution; when she points at the camera to tell you that 'we're through', we don't receive a convincing emotion of anger. Minogue is almost rolling her eyes when she is clearly being instructed from off camera to point in a direction so that a three-dimensional heart may be added in post-production to follow her finger. The cutesiness that the video is *attempting* to visually construct, through the vintage hairstyle and inspired clothes, would seem to mimic the ostensible cute innocent naivete of whiteness itself. Except, of course, that Minogue's bristles in the performance of this vision of white cutesiness. Minogue's own opinion on the matter is that "it

[258] Little Eva was quoted as saying, "Kylie Minogue's revival is all right, but mine is better." See Spencer Leigh, "Obituaries: Little Eva," *The Independent*, April 11, 2003.

was the least enjoyable moment of her early career. Behind the smiles she was cringing."[259] It was a performance that was so campy it made a camp diva cringe. The video stylistically resembles the video of another SAW produced singer and diva, that of famed drag queen Divine's "I'm So Beautiful." With high angled shots and a set replete with mirrors and various rubbish, Divine parades through the set in more bravado and a more exuberant style of camp we come to expect from drag. I mention this comparison because the 'trash' drag of Divine and other drag performers often deploy camp in such a way to critique whiteness through a repurposing or disidentifying with the markers of whiteness[260]—yet this is not what Minogue's brand of camp is doing in the "Hand on Your Heart" video. Unlike Divine, who might be said to use camp in such a way to make whiteness seem monstrous, Minogue's cringe-worthy yet-campy performance rather makes whiteness seem awkward, or uncomfortable, at best. And still, there's a pleasure in watching Minogue fail so magnificently at being a teen pop star, here. Halperin explains that

> Camp is not criticism, but critique. It does not aim to correct and improve, but to question, to undermine, and to destabilize. In this it differs from satire, which … functions as a *criticism*, a put down of inferior objects and practices. Whereas camp makes fun of things not from a position of moral or aesthetic superiority, but from a position internal to the deplorable condition of having no serious moral or aesthetic standards.[261]

Part of what inspires the investment in a performer like Minogue is the unrestrained, unapologetic enjoyment of watching her perform. Camp relies on enjoyment, and it allows an

[259] Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie*, 68.
[260] See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, for a discussion of the 'terrorist drag' of Vaginal Crème Davis which is specifically directed at white gay men. For a discussion of Ryan Landry and the performance of 'white trash' drag, see Karen C. Krahulik,"A Class Act: Ryan Landry and the Politics of Booger Drag," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1-30.
[261] Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 190.

audience to take pleasure in the failures of whiteness to congeal or naturalize.[262] Halperin again explains that "for camp, the unserious is not just a qualification. It is also a potential source of collective strength—hence, a strategic opportunity [that] …endows its antisocial aesthetics with a political dimension."[263] Minogue's campy discomfort in whiteness is a moment of possibility to not inhabit whiteness so earnestly, and without trying to be black or assume blackness. Her citation of other black performers like Little Eva and Donna Summer never intended, nor succeeded in appropriating blackness. This unserious inhabiting of the marker of whiteness then becomes a potential rallying point for other white queers.

Camp Case Law

To some, saying that Minogue is camp is almost redundant. In a popular British gay-lifestyle magazine, *Attitude*, for "The Camp Issue" of the publication, Minogue graced the cover with shirtless men while they all wore quizzical outfits made from clear plastic. Usefully, this publication tells the reader that Minogue is camp not only because she is loved and adored by gay men, "But what keeps Kylie camp – and what prevents Madonna from having been camp for at least 20 years – is the suspicion that, beneath all the styling and the feathers and the ruthless marketing at gay consumers, Minogue remains an essentially sincere woman who doesn't quite understand the joke."[264] In other words, though she is aware of her hyper stylization as a performer, she falls somewhat unclearly between Susan Sontag's distinction between naïve and intentional camp, not quite sure of what to make of all of this fame and hubbub.[265] Sontag's

[262] Esther Newton's useful reminder is that camp's pleasure is often the result of a transformed pain or suffering. See Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 109.
[263] Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 191
[264] Rubert Smith, "A Brief History of Camp: From Shakespeare to SuBo," *Attitude*, July 2010, 69.
[265] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 59.

classic "Notes on Camp" expectedly and easily maps onto Minogue: from an exaggerated performance ethos, to a seriousness that fails because it is 'too much,' to a kind of aestheticization that values " 'style' over 'content', 'aesthetics' over 'morality', of irony over tragedy"—all of these match the Minogue.[266] Most of the reviews of Minogue's albums or songs fall similarly into a pattern of saying 'all style, no substance,' 'pop without depth,' like Ben Ratliff's review of her 2009 tour, which shows a misunderstanding of both camp and Minogue. Indeed, to descry camp as being only 'aesthetic,' evacuated of 'content' or 'politics,' betrays a woefully feeble understanding of camp and its history in queer politics and creative aesthetic activism. Moe Meyer reminds us that the parodic nature of camp inserts a critique from the margins to an existing form of ideology.[267] In other words, where we find camp or parody, we find a critique of ideology. So, though it seems to be 'merely play,' or only 'aestheticization,' camp often operates as a kind of transformative cultural force, creating unexpected readings out of cultural texts or aesthetic practices which might typically produce prescriptive readings.

Camp operates as a critique of ideology through excess and artifice, a process of de-naturalizing cultural messages—adorning them to disbelief or interruption. Richard Dyer, in *The Culture of Queers*, describes this process, admitting that camp is not always progressive, but that it can be. Specifically, he explains that "Camp can make us see that what art and the media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications…" [268] Through the dissonance and incongruity of camp readings, we can learn that cultural messages are not facts or truths, and the laughter and joy of camp can be a way of reading against a text—a deconstructive move. Dyer points out that that there is a certain amount of responsibility upon the queer reader of camp to make it

[266] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 56-62.
[267] Moe Meyer, "Introduction," In *the Politics And Poetics Of Camp,* edited by Moe Meyer, (London: Routledge, 1994), 11.
[268] *Richard Dyer, The Culture of Queers (*London: Routledge, 2002), 60.

deconstructive or progressive. Contrast this with Margaret Drewal's much stronger claim about camp, where she explains that camp can seep into and hide within capitalistic systems of culture, leaving a trace that lingers, and that camp, "As a gay signifying practice…is by its very nature counterhegemonic; it confounds gender codes, overrules compulsory heterosexuality, and undermines the very foundations on which democratic capitalism was built." [269] No small feat! To Drewal, camp seems to be a magic-wand of critique and subversion. Except that Drewal's essay, does not mention race, or camp's relationship to race. Pamela Robertson, in "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp,' argues that despite attempts in scholarship to discuss camp within queer communities of color, "Most discussions of camp, whether about gay men, lesbians, or heterosexuals, assume the adjective 'white.'"[270] Given this, what are the possibilities for camp to restage whiteness itself?

Within Sontag's taxonomy of camp is the idea that camp rests on a failed seriousness, and with regards to Minogue, it is both her whiteness that is failing, and her whiteness that is expected to be taken seriously.[271] Minogue's whiteness never quite lands seriously, or never seems to be worn naturally in her performances. Minogue's campiness queers her certainly, but it also makes her whiteness awkwardly visible. Though camp has been derided by some as merely the aesthetic of upwardly mobile, bourgeois white gay men,[272] I want to pose the question of what happens to whiteness itself when read through the lens of camp? Whiteness, as a cultural

[269] Margaret Thompson Drewal, "The Camp Trace in Corporate America: Liberace and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall," In *The Politics And Poetics Of Camp,* edited by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 177-178.
[270] Pamela Roberston, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity', and The Discourse of Camp," In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 394.
[271] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 61-62.
[272] With great respect to Robertson, Uri McMillan's recent, and important work on rapper Nikki Minaj serves as a reminder that camp is *not* squarely in the hands of gay white men, and that black divas like Minaj use camp as a means of aesthetic self-fashioning. See Uri McMillan, "Nicki-aesthetics: the camp performance of Nicki Minaj," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 1-9.

logic that perpetuates a system of racial othering, demands all of its successes and accompanying privileges to be taken seriously, because it operates under the shroud of normality and invisibility, as explicated in Richard Dyer's important work entitled *White*.[273] Drawing from Peggy McIntosh, he explains that whiteness is a system of privileges that the white subject cannot see, and that these privileges become crystalized as 'normal.'[274] This is part of the difficulty in talking about whiteness, because it is something that is constantly trying to obscure its own power and effects. Ruth Frankenberg likewise carefully specifies that white invisibility is not a literal invisibility that people cannot perceive or detect whiteness, but rather white invisibility is whiteness assuming its own normativity.[275] So what I'm arguing for Minogue is that her campy sublime creates a situation by which her own whiteness fails in its expectation to be read seriously, thus denaturalizing it. To be clear, to speak of Minogue's whiteness in a state of failure is *not* to claim that she no longer benefits from white privilege. Nor am I trying to claim that Minogue is a 'good' or 'better' white person.[276] Rather, thinking about Minogue through a campy sublime allows us to see the failures of whiteness as a racial logic that demands a certain affect of seriousness that overlaps with an American exceptionalism that only sees the meritocracy of hard work instead of systems of social/racial stratification.

Whiteness relies on both seriousness and a Kantian disinterestedness for its own invisible perpetuation, but in a moment of the campy sublime, whiteness becomes queered, made strange. Both camp and the sublime defy disaffection and are aesthetic experiences that are often defined

[273] When speaking about whiteness as 'invisible' or 'normal,' it is important to remember that it is only invisible or normal to the white subject. Whiteness is all-too-often painfully visible and noticeable to subjects of color.
[274] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 8-13.
[275] Ruth Frankenberg, "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness," In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Edited by Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 81.
[276] Like many white performers, Kylie has made questionable choices in her videos and stage performances. A 2012 Mardi Gras performance in her native Australia shows Minogue adorned in an outfit styled to appear Aboriginal, with dancers dressed in similar outfits.

by their intensity and closeness to the object.[277] It is here that I see how the disinterestedness that the sublime repels is similar in nature to the seriousness that camp repels. As Kant outlines, the beautiful charms, it does not move to intensity; likewise, Kant states that beauty is held by the most sensible and reasonable of European races—Beauty is disinterested, sensible, white. Whereas to Kant the sublime is intense, unpredictable, moving, irrational, [278] Aesthetic practices that buck disinterestedness therefore also break from the racial associations between whiteness and disinterestedness, which orders whiteness above racial others in a Kantian taxonomy. Importantly, feminist art critic/historian Amelia Jones claims in *Body Art* how intensely embodied performances can shatter the illusions that disinterestedness holds in place. Specifically, "By exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender, ethnic, or other particularities of this body/self, the feminist or otherwise nonnormative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorize these conventional modes of evaluation."[279] An ethos or a practice of camp, however, always precludes one from full membership in the moral, ethical loftiness of the beautiful, because camp can never be disinterested. A simplification of classic theories of the sublime would indicate that 'the sublime = blackness' while 'the beautiful = whiteness.'[280] Yet camp yokes both the sublime *and* the beautiful together and produces a queerly dissonant pleasure in so doing. Pamela Roberston strongly asserts that camp "has a consistently progressive politics but may be, after all, a kind of blackface."[281] I appreciate the boldness of Robertson here, which offers a cautionary tale to camp reading and practice to not rely on black subjects for its own effect. However, her first assertion

[277] See Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *65*, and Kant, *Critique*, 134.
[278] Kant, *Observations,* 54, 109-112.
[279] See Jones, *Body Art*, 5.
[280] Kant, Critique. And Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 131.
[281] Robertson, "Mae West's Maids," 407.

neglects the fact that there is, of course, black camp—created for and by black queer folk. Secondarily, there are certainly camp texts which do not follow Robertson's claim that camp always uses black bodies to produce its own queer authenticity (*Mommie Dearest* comes to mind). Third, and lastly, again in response to Robertson's characterization of camp as blackface, it is not so much that camp relies on white bodies wearing blackness (though this does characterize her archive of analysis, it does not characterize camp broadly) to produce its effect, but rather that camp, because of its aesthetic tethering to those aesthetic phenomena of both the beautiful and the sublime, actually reveals the porosity and interconnectivity between whiteness and blackness. That is, camp is always touching something of difference.[282] This touch I point out draws from Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism*, and her insistence that an intimacy with otherness (for her particularly, with race and/or blackness) is not spectacular or unusual, but ever present. She states "It is quotidian intimacy that forces us to realize the other as *someone* with whom we interact and have an impact upon; our acknowledgement of this connection represents the *touch* and its fruition [my emphasis]. We do not create intimacy; it is there waiting our recognition. Let me rephrase this: we are bound intimately to others whether we realize or acknowledge such connection. The *touch* is the sign without a language to make it legible to 'others' (emphasis mine)."[283] Camp might allow us to see the illuminated connection between the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime—or said another way, the aesthetic ordering of race into white and black, but thinking about camp through Holland allows us to see how the categories of white and black have already encountered each other, and their touch is always available to see or sense. So what Holland is pointing us to is the fact that the white/black

[282] Take, for instance, even as Kylie descends from the Hammerstein Ballroom atop a chrome skull, or awkwardly debuting in a 1980s music video, she is citing both Donna Summer and Little Eva at the same moment she is developing her own camp ethos and downgraded whiteness.
[283] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 104.

binary is never so stable as we imagine, and that whiteness and blackness are perpetually locked in an erotic touch that both sustains them and racist practices, but also leaves open possibilities for new ways to inhabit race.

Minogue troubles whiteness through the campy sublime, through a consistent de-centering of herself on stage or in her media representations. In other words, the effect this creates is one which shows how camp has one foot in the white, charming, serious, disinterested, subdued world of the beautiful, while at the same time it has another foot partially in the sublime realm of intensity, closeness, movement, and blackness or brownness. Thus, camp partially inhabits difference and otherness while appearing at the surface to represent the norms of the beautiful. This is the paradox of camp. This is the means by which camp seems 'off' or feels strange. In this way, I understand Minogue's campy sublime to be a performance that is white, but not right. This does not imply that Minogue has access to blackness or brownness, or that she is not white, but rather suggests that Minogue's embodiment of whiteness is something that is always askew, jagged and awkward, exaggerated but never held up as exemplary. Minogue's whiteness is evasive, never fitting into the prevailing narratives of American whiteness. To explain what this looks like for Minogue perform 'white, but not right,' I offer a performance during the promotion of her 2010 studio album, *Aphrodite*, on June 4 of the same year. Minogue made a stop in the now-closed NYC gay nightclub Splash, ostensibly to meet and greet fans, perhaps say a few words. While Minogue was on stage, the bar began to play her newest single, "All the Lovers;" microphone in hand, Minogue begins an impromptu singalong in the bar, unexpectedly titillating the exuberant and shrieking denizens of gay nightlife. This all might not be so unusual, were it not for the fact that Minogue was surrounded by several male strippers on stage who were collecting dollars in their tight swimsuits or jockstraps (See Figure 4).

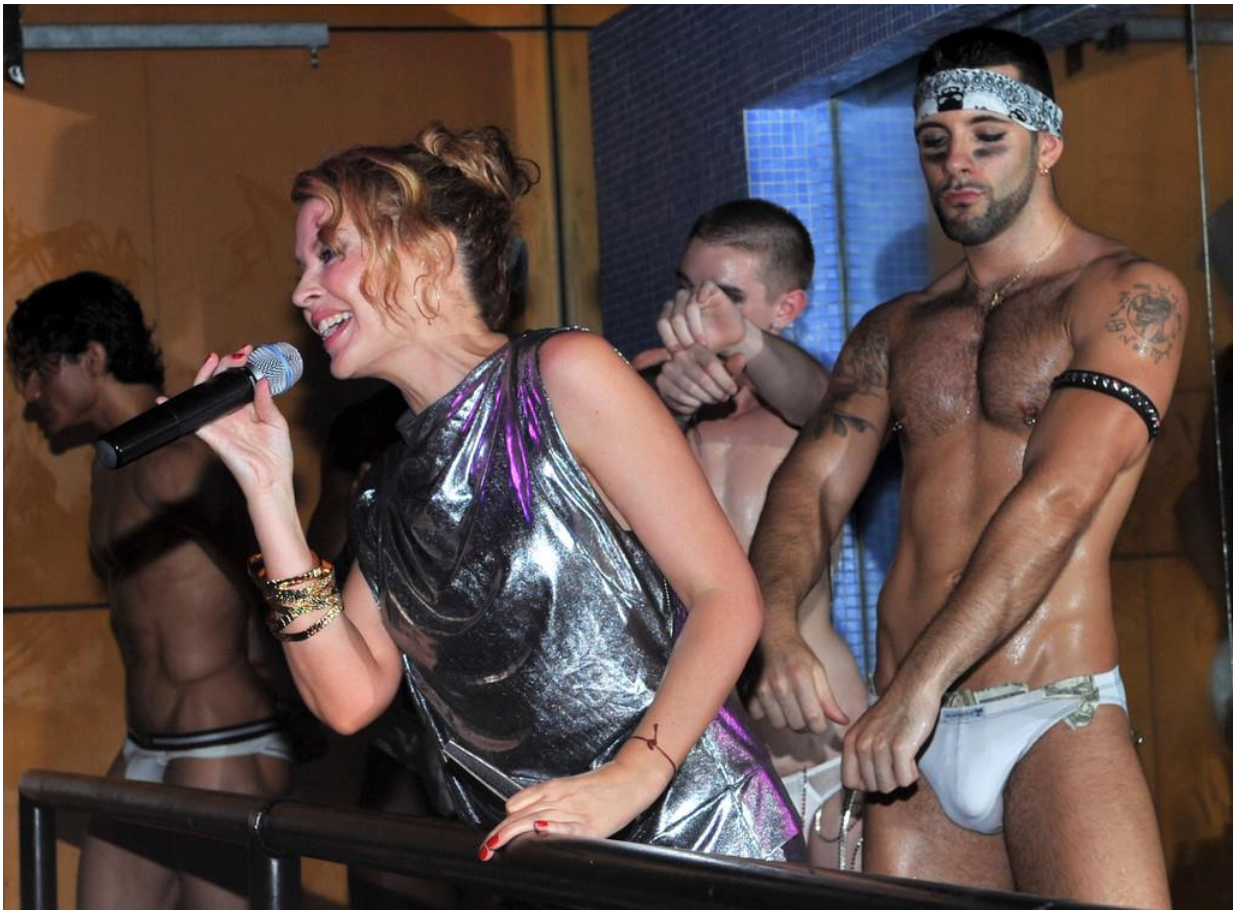


Figure 4 - Kylie Minogue performing at Splash, a gay nightclub in Manhattan. Taken June 4, 2010.

As previously stated in this chapter, enjoyment and pleasure are the shiny surfaces of camp performance, which always reveal upon deeper inspection a juggling act of difference and incongruity. Here Minogue is convincingly similar to her camp predecessor Bette Midler, performing in sweaty, gay cruising zones. It may not be possible for divas to ever fully escape the gritty, typically gay, highly sexualized spaces that often play their music. In many ways, this performance resembles the style of Grace Jones, Bette Midler, and other divas who specifically entered gay nightlife spaces to create that 'contact' with queerness that Delany claims is only possible in economically diverse urban areas.[284] Part of what makes this appearance

[284] See Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

spectacularly campy is that she seems completely unfazed to be performing next to sweaty gay strippers; granted it's not unusual for pop divas to surround themselves with attractive men on stage, as Grace Jones did for her amusement and their abusement. What's different here, though, is that these men are not *her* dancers, but strippers 'working it' for dollars in real time. In documentation of the performance, one can catch Minogue taking a glance at the boys, perhaps offering a flirtatious glance or making some enthused gesture to them.[285] Alternatively, she is not grossly objectifying them, either, not groping them or otherwise making a spectacle of their risqué outfits. Additionally, in this show at Splash, she is only occasionally singing along to her own songs, while the tracks are playing in their entirety in the background. What makes this 'white, but not right' is that this lacks the seriousness required for a performance of high spectacle and is rather a playful adventure where Minogue is genuinely enjoying a wild night on the town. Similarly, though several of these young dancers were men of color, Minogue was not using them as Madonna or Lady Gaga might, to amplify her 'coolness' or cultural cache, thereby heightening her own elevated whiteness; rather, Minogue has no direction at all over these dancers, she is merely sharing the stage with them, as though she was an audience member brought on stage unprepared. In camp, one enjoys an incongruous déclassé, the taboo mingling of an international pop star with sweaty strippers in seeming harmony. By comparison, one might be loath to find other more 'buttoned up' white pop divas like Taylor Swift, or other highly 'serious' musical performers like Sarah Brightman gracing the stage at a venue like Splash in such a fashion as Minogue.

[285] Documentation of this performance can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y6aYqxoKzM and here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ujNE4GXbeg

The Ebbing Tides of Whiteness – the Rise of Aphrodite

In the subsequent tour to her 2010 album *Aphrodite*, Europe and several shows in Australia received the extremely high production value "Aphrodite – Les Folies," a two-hour theatric spectacle which involved aerial stunts, several large video screens displayed as part of the set design, and a system of water jets to accent climactic moments within the show.[286] While the show was partly inspired by classic Greek and Roman mythology, presenting Minogue as the campy goddess of love, Aphrodite, with costuming, set designs, and other aesthetic flourishes vaguely Grecian in appearance, we also see additional influence of Golden-age Hollywood, particularly the 1936 *The Great Ziegfeld* and the 1946 MGM musical *Ziegfeld Follies*—these influences emerge throughout the show with a commitment to large, slowly paraded, ostentatious outfits.[287] As Minogue's entrance in the "For You, For Me" tour was both over-the-top and campy, she similarly enters the stage at the beginning of the "Les Folies – Aphrodite" show, by rising out of the stage on a golden seashell, recreating Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus."[288] One might think, then, that an entire tour themed around Minogue being a goddess would do no more than *enshrine* whiteness on an altar, to a paying audience, at that. The showiness of this delivery, though, prevents such a straightforward reading. Theodor Adorno, in his characterization of the sublime, says that the world of art has tainted the sublime so much that it is "one step away from the ridiculous,"[289] which happens to be suspiciously close to one of camp's main qualities of being seen as "art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much.'"[290] This ridiculousness, this unbelievability of camp is close in proximity to the

[286] A complete, HD version of this concert show can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqMmRX83RqI
[287] Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie,* 293-295.
[288] Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie,* 293-295.
[289] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 283.
[290] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 59.

doubts of perception and representation that characterize the sublime. And as Jean Francois Lyotard says of an encounter with the sublime, "…[I]t 'almost' exceeds the capacity of the imagination's comprehension and forces the latter to beat a retreat."[291] Minogue's evocation of a campy sublime throughout "Les Folies – Aphrodite" allows whiteness itself to be seen as mythic and produced, if indeed, through camp, it is not to be believed, 'exceed[ing] the capacity of the imagination.' The aesthetics of the production of "Les Folies – Aphrodite" reverse the assertion made by Sharon Holland that "Whiteness forms the stuff of the 'real' and blackness is always imagined territory," such that whiteness no longer seems 'real' but rather contrived and designed.[292] [293]

Part of how this visual process aesthetically plays out on stage is related to the specific iconography that Minogue engages with—that of classic Greek and Roman mythology. To engage with 'the classics' is often a camp endeavor. Richard Lindsay in his study *Hollywood Biblical Epics* convincingly argues that the mid-20th century cinema tradition of classical biblical stories often bears a camp aesthetic; the grand stateliness of these films serve as a backdrop for homoerotic or camp reading practices .[294] Similarly, classicist Sarah Bond, author of "Whitewashing Ancient Statues: Whiteness, Racism and Color in the Ancient World," outlines the deeply ingrained historical traditions of interpretation that have elevated Greek and Roman iconography—particularly marble statues—to paragons of the Western definition of beauty. Importantly, Bond tells us that Enlightenment era scholars of these classic icons and statues

[291] Lyotard, *Lessons*, 233.
[292] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 107.
[293] Looking at Ann Pellegrini's *Performance Anxieties* offers a clarification to Holland's point. That "Inscribing the black body as irreducibly different, other, secures the 'truth' of race and allows whiteness to masquerade as the real" This is a reminder that the psychic space that whiteness affirms itself on is always 'truth' with air quotes. Shaky ground, a 'masquerade.' Thus, to unmask whiteness might allow this psychic structure to unravel. See Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 100.
[294] Richard A. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from The Silent Era To The Modern Day* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), xxv-xxxv.

associated the material whiteness of marble with beauty itself, even though the historical reality reveals that these statues and sculptures were often painted and pigmented.[295] This of course suggests that whiteness only asserts itself at the expense of hiding bodies of color, in order to maintain its centrality. So, part of what makes Minogue's interpretation of Greek and Roman iconography so interesting is the way that—like Bond's essay—she offers us moments where whiteness becomes 'unmasked,' downgraded. Minogue's recourse to the mythology of ancient Greece/Rome as her source material matters because it is the imagined home of the origin of whiteness, vis a vis Western culture itself. What we can extrapolate from Bond is that this home was never the gleaming, marble white fantasy it was believed to be. Minogue's staging decisions here in "Les Folies – Aphrodite" augment this myth of whiteness to the point of explosion. Unmasking whiteness is a process of decentering it, taking off the façade it maintained in the guise of normality. Thus, unmasked whiteness appears, well…white! This casts onto whiteness what Veronica Watson claims is an oppositional gaze that is normally cast on persons of color. Specifically,

> …the potential of this oppositional gaze [is] to counter oppressive and exploitative performances of Whiteness [and] suggests an even more powerful way of proceeding…[A] way of naming a radical white subjectivity that is willing to embrace the darkness within itself…and to develop a critical white double consciousness that would effectively counter white schizophrenic subjectivity.[296]

Watson here is outlining the political efficacy in projects that seek to undermine or draw attention to hegemonic forms of whiteness. She also suggests that this act of returning the 'oppositional gaze' onto whiteness can create new forms of white subjectivity that are decentralized, and undo the naiveté of whiteness that presumes its own singularity and

[295] See Sarah Bond, "Whitewashing Ancient Statues: Whiteness, Racism and Color in the Ancient World, " Forbes, April 27, 2017.

296 Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 141.

superiority.[297] Minogue allows for such an oppositional gaze to develop, not through merely being white on stage, but by staging the racial encounter between whiteness and blackness itself.

While watching "Les Folies – Aphrodite" one would notice that Minogue's cast of backup dancers and backup singers is racially diverse and seemingly evenly distributed, but it is not until the latter half of the concert that racial otherness presents itself as an *encounter* with Minogue's whiteness, whereas earlier in the show it had remained unspoken, never gestured to. This building encounter with racial otherness culminates in the second half of the show, when Minogue is singing "Looking for an Angel," a song whose lyrics describe someone love-starved, waiting for their divine angel of love to come and save them. Surely enough, near the end of the song, upstage, and atop a platform erected on stage, we see a floating angelic figure, backlit, suspended by aerial cables, with a broad wingspan extended several meters in each direction, creating the impression of a radiant figure of the divine. As Minogue finishes her song, she walks, hand outstretched, towards the Angel on top of the stage's platform. This angel is glowing with divine light as Minogue approaches. Of crucial significance, the angel is here cast by a black man, and we find Minogue—the sublime diva—reaching towards another presence of the sublime on stage—one which inhabits a black body. Here Kylie, playing the goddess of love, Aphrodite, is not the sole avatar of the sublime, and her cautious approach towards this angel suggests that she may be in awe of someone greater than her. The next song begins. "Closer," a more intense, harpsicord infused electropop sound creates an aural mood of drama and tenseness, while visually we see Minogue proceed to climb (and is harnessed onto) the angel's back, while both angel and diva begin their flight into the audience, suspended dozens of feet in the air. The song ends with both diva and angel landing squarely at the extended apron of the stage. At this

[297] Watson, *The Souls of White Folk*, 141.

point, Minogue kneels in front of the campy emanation, in supplication, while both are lit in radiant, bright spotlights, which accent the sparkling gold resplendence of both of their costumes. Here we see the limitations of camp at completely disrupting or denaturalizing the *effects* of whiteness; that is, for this song to work on stage, Kylie relies on a black body to literally carry her through the performance. The effect of Kylie reaching the heavenly heights of flight are only possible through a theatrical manipulation of a black body. A campy sublime might exaggerate the tenets of whiteness to a point of exhaustion where they become highly visible, but such a campy sublime is still unable to completely extricate itself from the system by which racism perpetuates itself through black bodies being hailed, touched, caressed, or admonished by whiteness. My point here follows how Sharon Holland argues that whiteness and blackness are locked into an erotic dance of touches that connect and preclude. Specifically, "If touch can be interpreted as the action that bars one from entry *and* also connects one to the sensual life of another, then we might go so far as to say that *racism has its own erotic life*."[298] The dynamism of Hollands assertion rests in the fact that, as she states, "…touch 'abrogates.' It nullifies our stubborn insistence upon separation between races, sexes, or nations…"[299] We see this in Kylie's angel-assisted ascent in the *Les Folies* tour. And what does it mean to share the sublime on stage? In other words, might it be significant that the sublime is represented through a black angelic body on stage, and not *only* through the body of the white diva? And while the "Les Folies – Aphrodite" tour does not eliminate whiteness from the stage, or from culture, I see the staging of a campy sublime as here offering us a moment of interracial touch that is contrite and prayerful, as opposed to lustful.[300]

[298] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 107.
[299] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 105.
[300] Holland's theories on the erotics of racism assume an erotic charge to all racial encounters, but she does allow that some of these encounters unfold differently. For instance, here Minogue yearns in gratitude for the divine

The joy and exuberance that Minogue's campy sublime brings in *Les Folies* restages and reorders the erotics of race. After Minogue offers a prayer, the angel in front of her ascends into heaven, with a spotlight following him, and the following song begins—the exuberant "There Must Be an Angel (Playing with My Heart)," originally recorded by the Eurythmics. While Minogue and her backup singers, and her cast of dancers enter ecstatic and loosely choreographed fits of divine pleasure, occasionally glancing at the risen angel, one gets the sense that the sublime is here not only held in the hands of the diva, that the inclusion of a black angel as the messenger of the divine interrupts the centrality of Minogue in a tour performance ostensibly revolving *around* her. Whiteness maintains itself as a powerful social institution through a 'silence' policy that disallows any explicit gesture or mention to racial otherness. Phil Chidester, in an analysis of whiteness in the television show *Friends*, aptly titled "May the Circle Stay Unbroken: *Friends*, The Presence of Absence, And the Rhetorical Reinforcement of Whiteness," explains that "Much of the rhetorical power of whiteness is founded in its ability to avoid any explicit statements about or claims to racial centrality. It is a perpetual silence that resists any critical study of whiteness's social instantiation and rhetorical influence."[301] So, part of what Minogue's inclusion of blackness in the figure of the angel does, is to 'break the circle' of whiteness, visually at least. It is an interruption of the visual hegemony of whiteness that always seeks to obscure or hide blackness. Minogue's Grecian and godly inspired camp on stage reveals that whiteness can never indefinitely maintain its own insularity, because—returning again to Holland—whiteness and blackness are not discrete and impermeable, that their touch

angel on stage with her, yet never quite sexually engages him; compare this to Madonna's famous 1989 "Like a Prayer" music video, where Madonna passionately kisses a statue of St. Martin De Porres come to life.

[301] Phil Chidester, "May The Circle Stay Unbroken: Friends, The Presence Of Absence, And The Rhetorical Reinforcement Of Whiteness," *Critical Studies In Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 158.

that binds the two together breaks the perceived wholeness of one or the other.[302] Whiteness perpetuates itself by presenting itself as whole with no indication of the knowledge of its own whiteness, and so presenting this black angel as the sublime figure momentarily disrupts the illusion of whiteness as 'whole,' even as it simultaneously does this through a fantasy of blackness as mystical and unknowable. While Minogue and the angel both share center stage, bodies touching, in close proximity, she has decentered whiteness, if only momentarily. Minogue's evocation of a campy sublime is such that whiteness can never remain whole or intact, even when playing with the most basic tropes and icons of whiteness – the exaggeration of camp and the refusal of seriousness combines with a proximity to otherness that always reveals race.

In the climax of Minogue 2011 *Les Folies/Aphrodite Tour*, during her encore of 'All the Lovers,' while wearing an Esther Williams-style pearled bathing suit, standing atop a Busby Berkeley-esque pyramid surrounded by gyrating bodies and sometimes jets of shooting water, Minogue shouts at the breakdown of the song "London, I LOVE YOU!" Though it's not surprising that a performer would state their love and appreciation for their fans, it is curious to see how such love is staged and embodied through the excesses and extravagances of camp. Sontag herself speaks to this effect in her famous 'Notes.'

> Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character'...Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.[303]

Thinking through the above passage by Sontag, Minogue and the audience are caught in the aesthetic and affective frenzy that the sublime brings—it is a love that resembles affinity,

[302] Holland*, The Erotic Life of Racism*, 104.
[303] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 65.

respect, and appreciation for this shared moment by using the visual trappings (but without the content) of the love of sexual or romantic intimacy. Though Minogue's final 'I LOVE YOU' erupts at the same moment as jets of water shoot forth on stage, mimicking an orgasmic spurt, the effect is playful, not erotic. Is it possible that camp also speaks to a different kind of spectatorship that might defuse an assumed sexual objectification of women's bodies? If the audience's/viewer's connection to Minogue in this moment is not an erotic one, then it must be an altogether different kind of affinity. Andrew Ross addresses the nuances of the relationship between a gay male audience and their powerful female icons in his important essay "Uses of Camp." To Ross, this encounter with a diva by a gay male audience is a kind of identification with the world of emotions and feelings that all too often is essentialized as feminine.[304] So, this relationship between Minogue and her gay male audience is one where the diva sings and performs her feelings, and the audience, who does not sexually objectify her, instead identifies with the possibility of femininity that her voice or performance represents, allowing her audience to reinterpret their masculinity, thereby making space for the sissy or femme man. This is certainly one reason why divas are important to a queer male culture that has consistently been invested in 'butching up.' Ross elaborates on the importance of the relationship between the diva and gay men when he says,

> I could be argued that the camp idolization of female film starts [sic] contributes to a radical desexualization of the female body. In the context of a social spectacle where the female has little visible existence outside of her being posed as the embodiment of the sexual, any reading that defetishizes the erotic scenario of woman-as-spectacle is a progressive one.[305]

[304] Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics And The Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 323.
[305] Ross, "Uses of Camp," 324.

Though Ross is here thinking of divas through female film stars, and not necessarily singing divas, I agree with his estimation that camp opens up possibilities for queer spectatorship, ones where a gay male audience can adore and identify with powerful feminine performers without creating the same sexualizing gaze—even if the same visual trappings of female objectification are used.

Ross's and Sontag's insights give me an opportunity to muse upon how camp might affect the erotics of the racial encounter on stage, as explicated by Holland. What does camp do to the erotics of this encounter between Minogue and her unnamed angel, then? There is a sense in which camp could never be lusty, or if it tried, it would never be believed.[306] Camp, as David Halperin understands it, involves a process through which the feminine is always de-eroticized, seeming to imply that the burly, masculine, and gruff exteriors bear the majority of the erotic charge within gay culture, largely.[307] While I disagree with the simplicity of Halperin's argument, he's hit a nerve. Camp stymies a predictable narrative of desire and erotic possibilities. In camp, an erotic charge becomes less about sexual possibility and more about theatrical and bodily potential. Kylie Minogue's own body becomes less significant as an object of desire (not least of all because her audience is mostly gay men), and her male dancers (fit, built, and in various stages of undress) are less important as serious objects of desire, and rather more important as exaggerated markers of a somewhat Spartan masculinity. What does this do to whiteness, if the touch between the white diva and the black angel on stage loses its erotic spark? What do we learn about Kylie's whiteness when her interaction with her angel ends with her

[306] This point is drawn from Karli Cerankowski's recent work on Tim Gunn and asexuality, which points out how camp, through Gunn's dandyisms, de-sexes his own sexual identity into an asexual one. See Karli Cerankowski, "Queer Dandy Style: The Cultural Politics of Tim Gunn's Asexuality," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1/2 (2013): 226-244.

[307] See Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 201-220.

letting go, releasing the touch that binds whiteness and blackness together, with the black angel finally flying away in divine ecstasy?

A Camp Color Palette – Kylie's Off-white

Camp is sneaky; it slyly re-narrates a cultural scenario, defusing some, but perhaps not all of the hegemonic notes. José Esteban Muñoz states that camp can be a queer world making practice that "reanimat[es], through repetition with a difference, a lost country or a moment that is relished and loved." [308] So, while Minogue is undoubtedly styled to be a beautiful woman, a goddess on stage here, her success as a performer, and the success of "Les Folies – Aphrodite" is not predicated upon her success as an erotic object, or upon the erotic subjugation of black bodies. Put simply, Minogue's power as a diva is to perform camp in such a way where one can let go of 'seriousness,' and experience the joy of aesthetic release from such serious, disinterested modes of viewing. This shows us just how Minogue performs whiteness differently, never quite divesting herself from the advantages it brings her, nor is she able to upend whiteness as a racial logic tout court. And yet, audiences are drawn to this incongruity, the place where queerness is felt, and where an audience becomes moved in this unusual dance. For Minogue to dress up as the goddess Aphrodite and scream atop a spiraling pyramid that she loves you at the climax of her concert might be camp or strange, but the profundity of this moment emerges when you don't disbelieve her love, even as the archetypes and concepts on stage are made to be overwrought and unbelievable. We are simultaneously charmed and convinced.

Camp calls on us to abandon simple 'good' or 'bad' aesthetic judgments, and it creates such a disruption which allows us to reach a different aesthetic experience of enjoyment not

[308] Muñoz, *Disidentifications,* 128.

tethered to Kantian aesthetics or ethics. Minogue's performances lack the seriousness and disaffection of the beautiful, while still maintaining a charming elegance. However, there are moments where she seems profoundly normal and not nearly weird enough to be sublime. Yet her stage shows seem preoccupied with the development with the strange, awe-inducing magnitude of the sublime. Minogue's camp infuses herself with all the charms and familiarities of the beautiful, while also absorbing the rhetorical power and awe of the sublime. This sublime is not only queer because it is evoked by queerness or felt by a queer audience, but because the sublimity itself is queered through camp. Part of the pleasure, and perhaps the hopefulness, of the campy sublime within Minogue's brand of diva performance, is the idea that perhaps queer forms of whiteness can restructure themselves in unusual or interesting ways through existing cultural forms like performance and pop music. Minogue's queer, downgraded whiteness is a kind of whiteness where one bristles or shrugs under the mantle of whiteness, the way it postures and assumes superiority, accruing advantages and prestige to its wearer. A campy form of whiteness, a downgraded whiteness, performed through Minogue, might show us how whiteness fits uneasily on some, showing itself to be present in an aesthetic game which counts on its invisibility. Though Minogue cannot upend white supremacy with camp, perhaps she can offer a model through which white audiences might disidentify with whiteness in the service of disbelieving its own centrality. And furthermore, such forms of whiteness like Minogue's downgraded variety are about joy and ecstasy, even as they maintain an aspect of difference and otherness. Campy forms of whiteness may not reverse or undo systems of white privilege and white supremacy, but perhaps performances of white failure, whiteness without its serious, blind belief in itself, is part of an antidote to supremacy. For white queers, camp might allow possibilities for them to wear their whiteness in less highfalutin and more downgraded ways,

letting it become more visible but less central, and with an acknowledgment and awareness that whiteness only perpetuates itself through silence and invisibility.

Chapter 4

Flawless Moves--

Nomi Ruiz and the Restaging of Trans Spatiality

The face of Brooklyn-based Puerto Rican performer Nomi Ruiz was projected on several screens in Times Square on December 2014, as part of the 'Midnight Moment' project in NYC, from 11:57pm to midnight, in a video montage entitled *You Are My Sister*. The project was a collaboration between filmmaker Charles Atlas and Anonhi, and it contained re-edited clips from the concert documentary, *Turning*. Importantly, *You Are My Sister* was conceived by two queer artists, and the images show a rotation of feminine faces, each performing different queer iterations of womanhood or femininity.[309] The stakes are high for an installation in Times Square that displays the faces of Ruiz and other transgender women, especially when trans subjects across the US often find themselves the victims of discrimination, harassment, violence, and murder in incredibly disproportionate rates to those in the general population.[310] I might propose, momentarily, that the display of such queer femininities troubles the staid, commercialized, sterile feel of Times Square, a space which has become synonymous with gentrification, commercialization, and 'family-friendly' tourism. *You Are My Sister* offers us the chance to access the palimpsest-like trace of queerness after it has been paved over. Importantly, Times Square was not *always* synonymous with commercialism and gentrification. [311] But how do we

[309] As part of this project, one could also stream the song "You are my sister" while watching the video montage in Times Square by following a specific link that was on the Midnight Moment webpage.

[310] Per a report published in 2011 by the National LGBTQ Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality, harassment, discrimination, physical/sexual violence, and unequal access to resources are experienced—across the board—by a large number of transgender individuals. See Jamie M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Kiesling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, (Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), 2011. http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/ntds_full.pdf

[311] Samuel Delany reminisces about the vibrant sexual cultures in midtown Manhattan that he argues contributed to an abundance of interclass *contact*. He later gestures towards (without necessarily naming them) the Giuliani era processes of gentrification that dismantled these queer spaces, either destroying them outright, or scattering them to more remote areas of the city. See Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue.*

access the palimpsest-like trace of queerness when it has been paved over? I take heed of the words of José Esteban Muñoz, who claims that "Queerness…never fully disappears; instead, it haunts the present."[312] Muñoz relays the process of how queerness dissipates, becomes mourned, and is replaced by more normative sexualities and identities which flourish in that same space.[313]

Given this, we must ask, how does the diva make queerness felt within a cityscape that is contested and changing? What power does the diva hold to keep queerness thriving and agile in urban enclaves whose recent political and economic structures often foreclose queer subcultures—that is, how does the diva's movement correspond to the movement or formation of queerness itself? What kinds of bodies can divas project into the future of queerness? To begin answering these questions, perhaps instead of thinking of queerness as 'disappearing' or dissipating in the face of encroaching forces of normativization, we might better think of queerness as relocating itself.[314] So too, does Ruiz's Puerto Rican background contribute to this lingering across time, as performance studies scholar Sandra Ruiz understands Ricanness as the endurance of the brown body through time in an often challenging spatial politic.[315] That is, with the display of Nomi Ruiz among the images of such bodies in *You Are My Sister*, we see that large-scale efforts to normativize are never *wholly* effective; there are always reminders of queerness and brownness that linger and trouble, which stages themselves in more and more unlikely terrain. These traces, in turn, suggest a future vision where trans and racialized subjects are able to navigate around and through the changing faces of the city, creating new strategies for

[312] José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, The Performativity of Race, And The Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 684.
[313] Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," 684.
[314] Karen Tongson, in *Relocations*, similarly argues that queerness finds ways to maneuver and relocate in seemingly inhospitable terrain. Unlike Tongson, though, I am interested in the ways that queerness shifts and *remains* in urban enclaves, as opposed to absconding from them and forming elsewhere. See Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, (New York: New York University Press), 2011.
[315] See Sandra Ruiz, "Waiting in the seat of sensation: the Brown existentialism of Ryan Rivera," *Women & Performance* 25, no. 3 (2007): 344.

survival and subcultural intimacies, even though transness itself is being pulled into contemporary neoliberal discourses of diversity and multiculturalism.[316] This hearkens back to another of Muñoz's claims regarding the performance of queerness and its relationship to futurity, that "Certain performances of queer citizenship contain…an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present."[317] *You Are My Sister* therefore relocates queerness into a space in which it has been excavated. It is also somewhat reminiscent—on a larger scale—of Kitty Ayrshire's final gesture to Marshall McKann in Willa Cather's "A Gold Slipper." These strategically placed material reminders of queerness not only stick in the side of a normative public, but they prophecy the survival of divas and the queer legacies and bodies that they engender.

Learning the Moves: Negotiating the Future of Transness Now

It is the face of Nomi Ruiz within *You Are My Sister* which here inspires a sustained discussion of transness, race, and choreography in diva performance, even though Anonhi is perhaps more academically discussed alongside her emotional songs which often address the tensions of her trans identity. As a New York City-based performer, born to a Puerto Rican family in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Ruiz's background is one that shows her deep immersion in the queer and creative scenes of NYC nightlife and culture. Her sound and aesthetic was formed from experiences growing up amidst the street-sounds and fashions of Brooklyn, as much as it

[316] Consider the June 2014 issue of Time Magazine, featuring Laverne Cox, with the subtitle "The Transgender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Rights Frontier," the June 2015 cover of Vanity Fair featuring Caitlyn Jenner, or the success and accolades awarded to the Jill Soloway directed *Transparent* television series, among many examples of the conversation around trans identities becoming more subsumed into mainstream media and culture.

[317] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 49.

was from learning how to be queer, weird, and punk at Patricia Field's fashion boutique in Manhattan.[318] Similar to Grace Jones and the other divas in my archive, Ruiz constructs her sound visually, marrying trends and experiments in style with those of sound and the voice. She collaborated with the queer neo-disco act *Hercules and Love Affair* on their debut album, to wide acclaim, and has been a muse for houses in the high fashion world, notably performing for Christian Dior and Thierry Mugler. Most recently, Ruiz is the mastermind and lead singer of Jessica 6, a soulful electropop act whose name draws from a main character in the 1976 science fiction film *Logan's Run*, and perhaps also inadvertently references the strong and sexual music acts associated with Prince—Vanity 6 and Appolonia 6.[319] Throughout all this, Ruiz has used her own transgender and Boricua body to move across and within avant-garde, underground music, and/or fashion scenes.[320] In other words, she is somewhat of an 'it' girl. As the newest, or youngest diva in my archive, there is a sense in which Ruiz's story is one that is still unravelling, still inchoate and in the process of being told. While Grace Jones, Kylie Minogue, and 'Ma' Rainey, on the other hand, have had several decades of performance to consider, Ruiz matters particularly in this archive because she most presently straddles the temporal and spatial arrangements that divas both negotiate and create. Ruiz showcases the current state of diva performance that rises out of queer and Latina/o subcultural scenes of the early 21st century.

---

[318] See Nomi Ruiz, "Patricia Field's legendary boutique…" Facebook Post. December 8, 2015.

[319] See Peter Robinson, "Groove is in the Art," *The Guardian*, Feb 22, 2008.

[320] Even so, her own talent and career has been stymied at various places along the way as the result of her trans identity. Ruiz notes that some opportunities to perform evaporate, or musical projects disintegrate when executive-types learn of her transgender origins. Through all this, Ruiz battles the temptation by journalists and writers to quickly label her as 'Transgender Musician Nomi Ruiz,' instead preferring the phrase 'a woman of transgender origin' to describe her gender identity in print—never denying the importance or significance that transness has had upon her music or her perspective, but also distancing herself from attempts to translate her performative self into an easily digestible piece of journalism. See Kira Brekke, "Musician Nomi Ruiz On What It's Like To Be Trans In The Music Industry," *Huffpost Live,* Online video clip, *The Huffington Post,* December 19, 2015; Nadya Agrawal, "Watch The Video For "The Light," A Posthumous Collaboration Between J Dilla And Nomi Ruiz." *Paper Magazine*, June 17, 2016; and Mitchell Kuga, "Capricorn Rising: Jessica 6's Nomi Ruiz prepares for her upcoming New Year's Eve show," *Next Magazine*, Next Magazine, Dec 23, 2015.

Ramón Rivera-Servera argues that performance has historically been the strategy by which queer Latina/o subjects have created political sites of sociality in spaces of contestation.[321] I insist on Ruiz's importance within a larger conversation about divas, and in situating her as a specifically queer and Puerto Rican diva, even though such insistence conflicts with Puerto Rican music scholar Licia Fiol-Matta's assertion that "there should never be a great woman singer," because the masculine gaze of the culture industry frames the diva as already flawed and lacking, where "the impossibility of this business as usual is embedded a priori."[322] But my investigation of Ruiz within this project has less to do with how she has navigated the masculine dictates of the culture industry, or her success as a recording/performing artist, and more to do with what Ruiz is able to accomplish as a diva in the service of queerness and brownness, and how she transforms such assumptions of bodily or gendered impossibility. Thus, in examining Ruiz's specific vocal and choreographic movements on stage, we see how a snapshot of performance—as it pertains to a queer, trans Latina body reaching diva status on stage—actually exemplifies and provides further evidence to show how divas perform crucial cultural work to stage the survival of queerness in urban spaces as late capitalism progresses further. Divas—through the sublime—stretch and maneuver queerness into new and improbable directions. And Ruiz, as a diva of the twenty-first century, is stretching the scope of queerness to make room for her trans and Puerto Rican body. To be flawless, or to speak of flawlessness, is what I'm describing as a particular mode of performance that Ruiz evokes on stage, where her voice and movement appear so effortless that she momentarily appears to be without flaw. Ruiz's trans and Puerto Rican identities are ones constantly in a state of contestation, subject to the threat of violence, invisibility, or excess. So,

[321] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 6.
[322] Licia Fiol-Matta, *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 230.

for Ruiz to choreograph her vocal and physical energies on stage in a way that appears or is read as flawless resists the cultural impetus to read trans subjects as flawed, subject to 'clocking.' Flawlessness is a strategy of becoming - a way for Ruiz to reframe the visual and sensory narrative that often focuses on the detection of 'flaws.'

I intend for this chapter to have a futural thrust that is gesturing towards a more contemporary diva in Nomi Ruiz, who lets us how her performance work on stage and in artistic collaborations, navigates the pressures of both her racial identity—which mark her as 'excessive'—and her trans identity, which demands the appearance of 'realness' or 'stealth.'[323] As opposed to a performer like Grace Jones, who wears her identities messily, Nomi Ruiz choreographs them flawlessly. This concept of flawlessness is what Nomi Ruiz contributes to a project that focuses on diva performance and its relationship to particular formations of race and queerness in the long twentieth century.[324] Though 'Ma' Rainey, Grace Jones, and Kylie Minogue each evoke the sublime through a direct engagement or disidentification with excessive, messy, or inherently flawed performance styles, Ruiz is able to evoke a flawless performance of the sublime, one which reaches the intensity and overwhelming awe of the sublime through its near-perfect execution or seeming effortlessness. The aesthetic or affective intensity of the sublime—either through horror or awe—overwhelms our faculties, and it often draws us closer to it, and in the process, it challenges the boundaries of our known ontologies.

[323] The concept of 'realness' has been of academic interest at least since Jennie Livingston's 1990 *Paris is Burning*, and for a further explication, see Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, And Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 2013. 'Stealth' on the other hand, within trans parlance, implies many of the same ideas about 'passing' as 'realness,' but rests upon an assumption that one's trans identity will be kept secret, which some trans persons resist.

[324] Of course, this does not imply that Ruiz herself is a 'flawless' person, or that she is without character flaws, which would be putting transness itself on a kind of fetishized pedestal. Rather, flawlessness is a way to think about a stylization of the body, and a mode of performance that emerges in Ruiz's particular oevre of diva performance, one that expertly juggles the performance of multiple identities and resists certain tendencies to always read brown and trans subjects as inherently flawed.

Ruiz, as a woman of transgender origins, evokes the sublime, and transmutes its formlessness into flawlessness, moving her body from the realm of the impossible or unknown into that which is sensorially real and felt on stage, thus playing with and against the expectations of gendered and racial excess.[325] Gayatri Gopinath, in *Impossible Desires*, explains how "Queerness names a mode of reading, of rendering intelligible that which is unintelligible and indeed impossible within dominant diasporic and nationalist logic." Though Gopinath's argument is tied to the specific experiences of the South Asian diaspora, I find her words helpful here to understand how Ruiz as a diva performs transness in such a way that it navigates the precarity of transgender embodiment into something now possible.

Flawlessness is the way that Ruiz choreographs access to, and mobility around the demands, histories, and structures of her identity. Here I am defining choreography as a performative process of bodily formulation that involves a coordination of *both* movement *and* stillness in ways that can be staged theatrically or performed in more mundane, everyday ways. Not only is flawlessness a choreography that moves its subject, Ruiz, but if we think of flawlessness as a mode of the sublime it is a choreography that instills movement in others. This instilling that the sublime performs should remind us that sublime is rhetorical, that it strives to convince and convey. It wants to move you, to stir you. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant speaks to this movement of the sublime, "The mind feels itself moved in the representation of the Sublime in nature; …This movement may (especially in its beginnings) be compared to a vibration, i.e. to a quickly alternating attraction towards, and repulsion from, the same Object."[326] The sublime functions through moving and vibration in a similar fashion to Ruiz –

[325] See Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 187.
[326] Kant, *Critique* 120.

whose own movement and vocal vibration *moves those* who see and hear her. Interestingly, trans studies scholar Eva Hayward muses that "Transitioning is vibratory; transitioning women are, first and most importantly, vibratory beings."[327] There is something about transness that vibrates in a similar capacity to the sublime; itself moving and moving others. It is through this vibratory state of being that Ruiz animates past histories of the urban landscape and opens possibilities for futurity and queer places of belonging.

This sublime movement in flawlessness matters because of the ways that both transness and Latina/o identities are configured through movement and spatial negotiations. It is useful to think of trans and Latina/o identities this way, if only because much of the existing scholarship on these identity categories theorize it spatially, as bodily processes of movement in space and time. For instance, in *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker defines transgender identity as being "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place."[328] Jeanne Vaccaro, in "Felt Matters," likewise suggests that transness can be understood as a dynamic of movement but extends this theorem by offering that we might think of transness as choreographic. On this point, though, Vaccaro is hesitant, and sees such associations of transness with movement as limiting, claiming that, "Transgender subjectivity…is reduced to its *location* on or inside the body. Such a theory maintains that transition is defined by the totalizing, yet superficial language of exchange, a movement between two discrete genders or sexes: the liminal space and time between registers as merely a temporary stop en route to a fixed destination."[329] Where I depart from Vaccaro is to suggest that such movement is not always an exchange

[327] Eva Hayward, "Spider city sex," *Women & Performance* 20, no. 3 (2010): 245.
[328] Stryker here is implying at some level that this 'boundary' one is moving across is a bodily or psychic understanding of one's own gendered identity. See Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 1.
[329] Jeanne Vaccaro, "Felt Matters," *Women & Performance* 20, no. 3 (2010): 256.

between two bodily locations, but is more aptly thought of as a body moving and forming itself in space and time, where the 'end point' is less important than the social or political structures which make allowances for the specific parameters of the trans body itself.[330] In a similar vein, movement informs the work of Juana Maria Rodriguez, who argues that queer *latinidad* is a hermeneutic for understanding the fragmentedness and multiplicity across Latin American or Latina/o identities, and that it is always "a practice that *moves* across geographic, linguistic, and imaginary borders" (emphasis mine).[331] This suggests that movement and choreography frame the negotiation of racial identities just as much as they do sexual/gendered identities, particularly for a diva like Ruiz who confronts multiple identities and positions that Ruiz in her performances. Ruiz's transness always forms alongside her Puerto Rican body, particularly as she moves through varying the varying performative and public spaces of NYC. There is a sense, drawing from C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides*, that transgender identities *always* have a parallel relationship to racialized ones as they move through space and time. Snorton claims that

> Although the perception that 'race' and 'gender' are fixed and knowable terms is the dominant logical of identity, in this book 'trans' is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and 'blackness' signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility. Here, trans … finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transcended by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender.[332]

With respect to the specificity of Snorton's argument, which is tied to black experiences in the United States, I do think that he's correct in pointing out that both gender and race are never

[330] In many ways I agree with Vacarro, especially since so many of the narratives of trans identity that exist (usually in memoir or cinematic form) focus on the idea of transness as a *journey* of self-making, with the implicit understanding that one is moving *from* one gender and *into* the other. This is clear in such texts as *She's Not There* by Jennifer Finney Boyland, and the film *Transamerica* directed by Duncan Tucker.

[331] Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 30.

[332] Snorton C. Riley, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

'fixed and knowable,' and how both constantly negotiate themselves through the conditions and restrictions placed on movement and space.

Expanding on Snorton here, I suggest we revise the way we think about Stryker's definition of transgender identity as 'a moving across.' If transness is choreographic, invested in the dynamics of movement, what if it is not so much a limiting discourse—as Vaccaro suggests—of 'moving across a socially imposed boundary,'[333] i.e. from one gender to another, as much as it is something more akin to what Snorton suggests, a *moving within, around,* or even *into one's body*, creating and learning sensory choreographies of embodiment that do not necessarily having a clear start or end point.[334] This is a potential way in which the concept of flawlessness can be a useful departure from that of 'realness,' which implies that one is performing *convincingly* as a particular gender or identity, and where the boundaries of that gender or identity are thus solidified and knowable. Flawlessness rather allows for the performance and choreographic mapping of a gender or identity without assuming the fixity of those categories. Flawlessness implies neither passing nor 'realness,' but is rather a reframing of the trans subject away from the persistent desire to 'clock' or 'detect' the presentation of her perceived gendered flaws. My intention of reframing transness in this way is to offer alternatives to conceptions of transness that inevitably fall back into theories of sex and gender that rely on discussions of the perceived boundaries between 'man/woman' or 'masculine/feminine.' As such, thinking about transness in this light also avoids the tendency to discuss the trans body as

[333] I am, of course, not minimizing the very real felt presence of the social boundaries that surveil and bring violence to trans bodies.

[334] To be clear, approaching transness in this way accounts for the gendered variations among nonbinary, genderqueer, or agender persons who do not necessarily approach transness as a movement within a fixed understanding of a gendered bodily terrain. If we let go of the fixity of a gendered destination as it pertains to transness, then we can also depart from the demands and expectations that come with those assumedly fixed gendered destinations.

always 'in between' sexes or genders, as though they cannot have any 'thisness' of their own, being between two poles which defines them only by their difference or exclusion. Additionally, if transness is conceived in terms of movement and choreography, then we can attend to the ways that a diva like Nomi Ruiz moves into and defines the parameters of her own trans body, and also helps us to see the way that Ruiz uses her diva status to navigate and restructure urban space to in the service of her trans identity.

Through looking at Ruiz's performances within NYC, and materials and images related to Ruiz's projects in and apart from Jessica 6, we see that diva performance not only compels those in the audience to dance and sing, but that the diva's own movement and dance is deeply important if we want to consider how divas structure *themselves* as queer figures of difference at the same moment they inspire a queer identification in others. Ruiz's choreography of the sublime through flawlessness allows transness to emerge out of a phenomenological impossibility and into a haptic reality on stage. Divas, as I have said in the introduction to this dissertation, often mark the emergence of difference on stage. They contend for space, mostly for themselves, in the cultural terrain, as a way to gather a living and to gain some form of cultural capital. But, in borrowing again from Muñoz, I want to point out how Ruiz also uses performance in order to map her body onto a social space, and as a consequence of such performance praxis she also ignites "different circuits of belonging…which is to say … recognition [which] flickers between minoritarian subjects."[335] But the corollary effects of diva performance always produce audiences that act as enclaves of queerness that surface and resurface unpredictably against the face of violence and erasure. If divas cannot create a vast social *movement*, then perhaps the queer shockwaves they levy upon their audiences produce the

[335] Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down…," 680.

effect of a social *vibration*. As my earlier nod to Kant described the effects of sublime feeling as those of a vibration, I want to emphasize that the social vibrations Ruiz produces matter because they rhetorically resonate with those 'in tune' to the frequency of queerness. Not only that, but like shockwaves after seismic disturbances, they continue into the future, able to be felt for some time after the initial 'hit.' Ruiz's pulls back the palimpsest-like layers of history and *dances* in the cultural legacies of Latina/o queerness in the avant-garde within NYC. Ruiz then offers a choreographic map of trans identity that looks much less white, much less normative, and much more invested in a historically informed queerness.

"I am not a prisoner!" – Ruiz's Refusal

> Not everyone will really be surprised by the various changes – hormonal, surgical or of habit – but all will inwardly salute your successful metamorphosis. In other words your heroism in having made the attempt, been ready to brave scandal and see it through till you die. Transsexuals are heroines. In our devotions they speak familiarly with saints, martyrs and criminals of both sexes, and with heroes and heroines. And the haloes of heroes are as surprising as those of transsexuals. If he doesn't die, anyone who becomes a hero carries a lighted candle around on his head for the rest of his life, night and day.[336]
>
> - Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*

The above passage in Jean Genet's 1986 mysterious and rambling posthumously published last major work, *Prisoner of Love*, is rather unusually juxtaposed within the rest of the work's narrative about the Fedayeen of Palestine and Genet's extensive time with them. Lest this inclusion seem a non-sequitur, I introduce it because it provides a literary musing on how transness can function in the service of resistance, and how transness itself is formed by confronting the boundaries imposed on the body. Genet's work is preoccupied with questions of queerness, space, movement, and imprisonment, such that Even if Genet's insight is

[336] Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love,* Translated by Barbara Bray (London: Pan Books, 1989), 150.

unexpectedly placed within his memoir, turning to him is useful given his preoccupation with questions of space and how it forms the body. Take for example his 1950 silent film *Un Chant D'Amour* which is concerned with how queerness moves within confinement, or his 1943 novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*, which follows memories of the queerly-gendered Divine as she moves through the city. Though Genet's daydream about the trans body in *Prisoner of Love* is embedded within a larger narrative specifically attached to Palestine and the Middle East, it gives me an opportunity to develop his line of inquiry in regards to the trans body. Genet inserts the trans body into his narrative as if to say that they too are freedom fighters, like the Fedayeen, subject to the same challenges to movement and citizenship, and deserving of the same amount of respect and even admiration. But perhaps it is more accurate to say not that all trans people are freedom fighters, but rather that a trans diva like Ruiz has a unique role within queer 'fights' for freedom, and that she can take on the role of warrior or hero that Genet gestures to. Despite the restrictions that they often face politically, economically, or spatially, divas create and craft worlds that allow themselves and those that seek them to survive.[337] When applied to transness itself, the very title of Genet's work—*Prisoner of Love*—suggests something about how the trans body is compelled to move and perform within certain confinements of space and affect. Movement is both a realm of possibility for trans subjects to form and the realm in which they are policed and surveilled.

But the process of 'breaking free' from these confinements of space and affect is what suffuses Ruiz's performative ethos with the exceptionality that frames the diva. Though Kylie Minogue may be filling stadiums and Grace Jones may be entertaining at legendary party spaces

[337] Divas participate in what Muñoz would call acts of queer world making; that such creative and alternative restructurings of bodies and ideology actually produce queer alternative worlds. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.

to engage their hungry audiences, Ruiz has a markedly more intimate, but no less effective performance venue. It is in smaller venues that Ruiz is able to craft a different kind of sublime, one that is close and intimate. On November 6th, 2013, at Mercury Lounge in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Ruiz brought Jessica 6 to perform, hoping to promote new material, and to keep her loyal followers satisfied with a low-key show. Mercury Lounge is a somewhat typical bar/performance space combination, with a bar in the front area, and a performance space and small stage in the back area surrounded by seating against the walls. In the hour or so before showtime, DJ Eli Escobar, a frequent collaborator of Ruiz's, was mixing grooves and providing the perfunctory 'warm up' to the main event of the evening. Just as Escobar clears his set, and the lights change, marking the signal for the show to begin, I look around as the crowd begins to move towards the stage. Somewhat expectedly, I notice that the audience is mostly (what I assume to be) gay or queer men, both white and black or brown bodies. It occurs to me that the screams and shrieks that I am normally accustomed to hearing during diva performance are different here. As Ruiz and her dancers approach the stage, the familiar shouts of the diva's name are heard, chanting "Nomi!" but also "Viva!" – the first name of one of her dancers. I realize that Viva (nee Viva Soudan), and Ruiz herself, know many of the people in the audience personally. To this audience, they are not encountering the unknowable celebrity of Grace Jones or Kylie Minogue, but a social friend or acquaintance in Ruiz—who is no less a diva or no less a star. This intimacy that Ruiz evokes and channels is only different from Jones and Minogue at the level of scale. Our feelings towards divas are often such that we desire closeness and intimacy with then, even going so far as to create fantasies of friendship with them—a symbolic gesture to the significance of the relationships we have with divas as we live our everyday lives. At Mercury Lounge, though, this camaraderie is more palpable than fantasy-based. It is as though

Ruiz's audience is present to see, hear, move, and be moved by *their* local legend, the possible friend of a friend who feels like a radiant part of the world they are from. Juana Maria Rodriguez recalls her memories of queer dance parties when she was a teenager in 1974, and how the coming together, party-atmosphere was an oftentimes impromptu coming together of queer bodies that heralded queer possibilities[338]. Even though Ruiz's performance at Mercury Lounge is not a dance party, per se, and the era of disco that Rodriguez is remembering is long past, I believe it is still crucially important that Ruiz—as a diva—is able to gather an audience of queers and/or folks of color to feel a part of her show. People go to see Ruiz perform to get a glimpse, or an earful, or a taste, of queerness in a city where queerness is moved and shuffled around, whereas 'gay' is rather openly available and seemingly ever-present.[339]

Bodies that move and touch on the dance floor have the power to ignite queer intimacies, but so do bodies on stage, frantically nailing a choreographed routine. Flawlessness emerges in this 'nailing of a routine,' as if Ruiz's vocal and kinetic enthusiasm also 'nails' the performative construction of her own body as a diva. As the show at Mercury Lounge progressed, a familiar and pronounced 1-2-3-4 count begins, followed by a bubbly yet sharp and catchy synth beat. The audience immediately recognizes the song as "Prisoner of Love," which was originally recorded as a duet between Ruiz and Anonhi on the debut album of Jessica 6, *See The Light*.[340] Though the lyrics of the song dwell on the experience of being *subject to* one's feelings of love, e.g. "Break these chains // take me higher //… I'm just a prisoner of love," Ruiz chose to interpret

[338] Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures,* Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, And Other Latina Longings (*New York: New York University Press, 2014), 104.
[339] Significantly, Ruiz's connection to dance music and/or neo-Disco carries on a queer legacy. In a *Guardian* interview with the cast of *Hercules and Love Affair* (an earlier project Ruiz was a part of), *Hercules* frontman Andy Butler discusses the backlash against disco in the 1980s that was seemingly the result of an AIDS-panic that stemmed from anything too queer in sound or appearance. See Robinson, "Groove is in the Art."
[340] This song also, coincidentally, shares a name with Genet's final work. Though, to my knowledge, this is more serendipity than it is an intentional homage.

this song in live performance in such a way that it resists a reading of the song as one about melancholic queer desires. Before the lyrics of the song properly begin, Ruiz sings a series of whoops, followed by yelling into her microphone "I am not a prisoner!", and turning her microphone to the audience, indicating that this is where they should repeat that sentence with the same cadence and beat. Repeating this process a few times, she whips the audience into a frenzy that feels much more like liberation than a melancholic imprisonment. Though this is not an unusual tactic for performers at large venues to ask their audiences to 'sing along,' the intimacy of the setting at Mercury Lounge marks this event of audience participation as affectively different. Instead of resembling a pop star asking her fans to sing part of the verse with her, this introduction to "Prisoner of Love" rather seems like a performance that offers a variation on a call and response tradition. Ruiz here is performing subcultural knowledge in such a way that it creates *queer* cultural intimacies. What Ruiz is doing, though, is engaging with the trope of imprisonment, the 'prison' of the 'wrong body' for trans people, and instead of affirming that trope, she transforms it into a site of movement and new bodily potential. I see Ruiz's performance here echoing Eva Hayward's claim about the bodily 'trap' of trans subjectivity, and how she states that "To be trapped in the body, then, is possibility rather than only confinement, trapped is about building-out, un-knotting so as to re-knot the territory of the embodied self, to speak and receive ranges of sensuous input from one's environment"[341] Thus performance, the creation of queer spaces where the trans diva and a queer audience can share in song and dance become the place where bodies re-knit themselves in the sensory abundance of the space, in this case Mercury Lounge. In recounting this performance, there is a sense in which Ruiz, as Genet suggests in the aforementioned passage from *Prisoner of Love* "carries a lighted

[341] Hayward, "Spider City Sex," 244.

candle around on [her] head for the rest of [her] life, night and day," becoming a heroic figure, dancing for the memory of what was before and what might be. This is, crucially, what divas are destined to do, become queer heroes and carriers of forgotten memories and legacies.[342]

In this moment right before Ruiz launches properly into the main verses of "Prisoner of Love," I am struck with the way Ruiz moves and the way her voice carries, soothes, and strikes powerfully. An effortless grace carries each of her movements – she performs with confidence in her statuesque beauty. The *Guardian* once described her role on the debut album of *Hercules and Love Affair* as "a performer who boasts the spookily effortless air of a future pop icon."[343] This effortlessness is ever-present, and effervescent in the performance; I lose myself in the audience around me. The two backup dancers on stage behind Ruiz are sweating, energetically embodying the lyrics that speak of pleasure, pain, and desire. After she has finished conducting her call-and-response, Ruiz stops singing to join her dancers, merging into the frenetic pace of the choreography without missing a beat. Flawless. Ruiz is not noticeably winded or showing any signs of exertion, as though she is impervious to such pedestrian limitations. The music video for the song "Prisoner of Love" is being projected on stage during this performance, leaving shadowy marks and trails on Ruiz and her dancers while they move. The effect is entrancing, almost over-stimulating. The sensorially diverse performance creates that which Eva Hayward might call the *texture* of transness. She explains that,

> The movement of the sensuous across the perceptual registers creates *texture*, which propagates embodiment through the excitation of contingencies and intimacies, leaving marks and traces … Texture is the unmetabolizable *more*, the residue of passing, of animate forces moving across bodies and objects. The transitional body is a textural body, generation contractions of the sensorium … [344]

[342] This point combines Genet's insight with Jeanne Scheper's more careful articulation of diva retroactivation. See Scheper, *Moving Performances*.
[343] Robinson, "Groove is in the Art."
[344] Hayward, "Spider City Sex," 237.

Ruiz is a trans diva, formed by the sensory textures created by performance. She becomes such not only through her soulful voice, her beauty, her style, her seemingly effortless navigation of the stage, but also through those audience members dancing frantically and chanting her name, her dancers dripping with sweat, the video projections lighting the stage, and the stale hot air circulating around Mercury Lounge. But to be more specific, the texture that Ruiz brings to this performance is a flawless one, fluid, with the "spookily effortless air" that the *Guardian* so deftly notes about her. At the midway point of the song, Ruiz sings the refrain, "I'm just a prisoner of love…"—but unlike the recorded version of the song, she sings the final word of the refrain, *love*, seventeen times until breathless, and immediately jumps in-sync with her backup during the 'dance break' portion of the song. The intensity in which she jumps into step with her dancers reframes her previously sung words and suggests that—as she asserted with the audience—'I am not a prisoner.' She continues, singing "Break these chains, take me *higher*." As she repeats the word 'higher,' her voice moves higher and higher, taking the audience to the apex of her vocal range. The audience shrieks and screams their approval, and I can't help but think of Thea Kronborg in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, whose operatic arias lead to the same gasps and roars of ecstasy in an audience seeking pleasure. Only now, the stage is not the Metropolitan Opera, but a venue noted for hosting independent music acts, and the audience is not the cultural and economic elite, but a group of queers and/or folks of color who have perhaps crossed town to have a moment of identification with their local NYC diva. A diva whose own queerness sometimes puts her at odds with the rest of the city, or even the very venue that hosted her. After the Jessica 6 show ended, the audience began filtering out of the performance section of the venue, and into the bar area to order drinks, chat, flirt, and enjoy the post-show energy. The management of Mercury Lounge, though, informed everyone trying to order or stay that we must

leave the venue, in order to make room for the *next* act, which was performing in an hour or so. The fans, audience, dancers, and Ruiz herself all left the venue, giving rushed thanks and goodbyes amidst the chaos of NYC streets. I mention this anecdote, if only to emphasize that these struggles to create a sense of place are always herculean efforts with often transient effects. Though divas have the power to create a felt sense of place, this sense of place exists not as an ever-enduring phenomenon, but as a moment or series of moments which leaves a residue of queerness that remains, in the hope that queers recognize and remember it.[345]

But sometimes these attempts by divas to create moments of queerness do not always succeed—even on a small scale. As a point of comparison, earlier in July of 2013, months before her show at Mercury Lounge, Ruiz performed at the famous and ritzy Marquee nightclub, located in the posh Chelsea neighborhood.[346] While during her set Ruiz performed the same song as I have discussed during her performance at Mercury Lounge, "Prisoner of Love," the response to this performance could not have been more different. Even though Marquee is noticeably a 'high tech' venue, capable of more video projections and lighting effects, the choreography and vocal tenor of the song remained the same from the performance of "Prisoner" months later. What is startling, though, is the almost complete lack of movement or perceivable enthusiasm in the audience at Marquee. Many of the audience members are not looking towards the stage. Perhaps some are gently shuffling their shoulders, but none are loudly clapping, cheering, or singing along to the song. To this audience, it seems, Ruiz is a stranger. With a 50$ cover on most nights, pricey bottle-service, and celebrity attendance, it begs the question: When Marquee and more bougie club spaces are about money and privilege of access, that is, being 'seen' is the reason you go, what does it mean for a moderate sized group of loyal queer followers to let-loose

[345] See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 71.
[346] Documentation of this performance can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmnXubK5Xm8

to Jessica 6 on a weeknight in the Lower East Side? Ruiz's smaller-scale, more intimate performances, like the one at Mercury Lounge, stage not only her own vocal and kinetic choreographies of embodiment, but also stage the forms of subcultural queerness that divas are always attached to. Namely, we can clearly see that the audience of Jessica 6 is more appropriately the underground queers who desire identification with the diva and performative pleasure that comes from being and dancing in the same space as her, in great contrast to the ostensibly disaffected status-seeking party-goers of Marquee.

I believe that this feeling, this identificatory desire and search for pleasure, is at least *part* of the way that underground 'scenes' form. The production and staging of local intimacies bring bodies together in such a way that they represent the multiple and complex subjectivities produced in that urban enclave. Ruiz's Puerto Rican background is significant in a conversation surrounding the production of these same urban intimacies. Juan Suarez, in "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side and the Queer Underground," lays out a thorough and complex history of how queer Puerto Rican artists and performers were instrumental in the construction of the vibrancy associated with underground queer avant-garde scenes within New York City that brought such figures as Andy Warhol and Jack Smith into prominence.[347] Suarez is also quick to note that the Lower East Side was the place where Puerto Ricans migrated en masse in the mid-20th Century and mingled with and into the avant-garde creative communities.[348] Significantly, in an *Interview Magazine* article talking with Ruiz, she mentions that she started performing in the basement of the now defunct Ace of Clubs, also in the Lower East Side, and that she 'cut her teeth' performing around a group of her close friends.[349] Perhaps we should read Ruiz's performance at

[347] See Juan A. Suárez, "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side and the Queer Underground," *Grey Room* 32, (2008): 7-8.
[348] Suárez, "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side," 7-8.
[349] See Gerry Visco, "Premier and Interview: 'Life or C.R.E.A.M.,' Nomi Ruiz," *Interview,* September 18, 2013.

Mercury Lounge as a historical and personal return to the 'scene of the crime,' carrying on a legacy of queerness that, to her, is always also about being brown. Inasmuch as the white queer scenes in NYC during the 1960s, particularly the Ridiculous Theater of Jack Smith and later Charles Ludlam, were using camp to engage with ideas surrounding excess and ethnicity, often diluting or appropriating racial differences, these scenes and sensibilities rubbed up against, and bled into the Puerto Rican queer scenes.[350] Suarez nevertheless states that, "Puerto Ricans developed a distinct homosexual subculture less based on passing than on flaunting, a subculture frequently dominated by fiery queens that was visible in the streets and developed an active party network."[351] Here we see that queer Puerto Rican bodies in NYC are marked as doubly 'excessive,' that is, their ethnic background aligned them with a culture that was seen as 'flamboyant,' while their queerness was likewise performed *against* the dictates of assimilation, embodying a sparkly and often gender-transgressive gayness.[352] In some ways, this dynamic double-bind has always haunted Puerto Rican performers within the cultural terrain, and it is this phenomena that Frances Negron-Muntaner takes up in *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*. Negron-Muntaner, as she develops the history of Boricua aestheticization throughout the 20th century, remarks on the ways that white queer culture attached itself to different cultural forms of performance than their queer Boricua counterparts did, stating that "…each [queer] community's constitutive relationship to shame required the ample use of the performative arts. If for middle- and upper-class white men 'performance' often meant the theater, opera, ballet, and movies, for working-class Puerto Ricans—queer or not—it

[350] Suárez, "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side," 13. See also Sean F. Edgecomb, *Charles Ludlam Lives: Charles Busch, Bradford Louryk, Taylor Mac, and the Queer Legacy of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).
[351] Suárez, "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side," 13
[352] Suárez, "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side," 13.

has meant popular music, dance, and sports" (108). Negron-Muntaner's point reminds us of the ways that the African American community in the early 20th century produced their own pantheon of divas given the cultural and economic forces that precluded them from accessing the worlds of opera, ballet, or more classical forms of theater—notably the great "Mother of the Blues" in Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. As far as Negron-Muntaner is concerned, though, 'popular music [and] dance' become the cultural references that energize and engender Boricua performance throughout the 20th century. Keeping Nomi Ruiz in mind with this sentiment, we find her movement, her dance, and the vibrations of her voice intimately linked to the performance of racial and gendered identity, particularly the cultural legacies of queer Puerto Ricans in NYC.

Phenomenal, Feminine, Exceptional, Boricua, Diva

> "the epitome of femininity. She's the perfect icon of what it is to be feminine, an ultra femme, a diva."[353] – Gabriel Magdaleno on Nomi Ruiz, *Interview Magazine,* Sept 9, 2013.

In the above excerpt from *Interview Magazine*, Magdaleno, a friend and collaborator of Ruiz, says what many of us are thinking when we see, hear, or are in the presence of Ruiz. I read Magdaleno's celebration of Ruiz's femininity, and his conferring of diva status on Ruiz as an acknowledgment of the queer possibilities inherent in the cultural work divas perform. However, in casual conversations regarding Ruiz, I am often asked what I think about Ruiz's ability to 'pass' as a cisgender woman because of her petite frame and the way she often fits into normative standards of feminine beauty. Implicit in these hesitant comments is a doubt that Ruiz can perform important or lasting cultural work if she is 'passing,' or presenting as a binary

[353] See Visco, "Premier and Interview: 'Life or C.R.E.A.M.,' Nomi Ruiz."

transperson. These doubts can set up a precarious kind of double-bind for trans people, where there are intense pressures to 'pass' for one's own safety, comfort, or happiness, while at the same time expecting trans people to embrace queerness and eschew the social norms associated with the performance of normative gendered identities.[354] Even if Ruiz is not immediately read as transgender, if she 'passes,' her racial identity as Puerto Rican already marks her as excessive and queer in significant ways. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, in *Queer Ricans*, discusses the challenges faced by Arthur Aviles, a queer male-identified Nuyorican dancer/choreographer, in resisting readings of his naked body that always and already mark him as queer and racialized. La Fountain-Stokes muses that, "While it is undoubtedly a challenge to inscribe 'Puerto Ricanness' and to a lesser degree, 'gayness,'…onto a naked body – for example…Does this identification rely on a very specific racialization of Puerto Ricans or of muscles, for example, as a signifier of gayness? What of Puerto Rican and gay bodies that cannot be easily read?"[355] La Fountain-Stokes offers important insights into how queer Puerto Ricans struggle to narrate the story of their bodies against the discursive and aesthetic tendencies to overdetermine them. In other words, criticisms of Ruiz that question her impact as a performer because of her ability or tendency to 'pass' betray a desire to always want to read a queer and Puerto Rican body in a particular way, looking to find the signifiers of transness or brownness, as if those are readily known or available. Such discussions obscure a chance to look at exactly how Ruiz negotiates her own trans and racial embodiment. So how does Ruiz make room for both identities on stage and in her 'home turf' of NYC? Her performances, then, seem to strive to find some way to inhabit her body and aestheticize it without accepting the interpellative hail that would mark her

[354] For a more thorough discussion of the issue regarding the tensions between *queer* and trans and intersex identities, see Sara Ahmed, "Interview with Judith Butler," *Sexualities* 19, no. 4 (2016): 490-491.
[355] Lawrence M. La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures And Sexualities In The Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 156.

as being 'too much,' *either* because of her Puerto Rican identity, *or* from her trans identity. For Ruiz, she is doubly queered by the attention placed on her body from her trans identity and her Boricua identity. The demands and expectations of each are different, yet it is precisely these demands of identity that stage the site of possibility in her performance work as a diva. As I argued earlier, flawlessness allows for the performance of identity but does not assume the fixity or determinism of identity. Ruiz's performances can play with excess in identity without participating in the belief that such excesses mark an essential quality of her racial or gendered identity.

Of particular importance to this discussion is the way that attention from the fashion industry has given Ruiz a platform and a reason to negotiate this perhaps-tangled skein of identities. In some ways, Ruiz cannot escape the attempts by the fashion industry to control or emphasize her racial or gendered 'excess'; where Boricua is understood to be a site of excess[356] that always queers. This excess draws attention to the Puerto Rican body in a way that queers it.[357] *Vogue Paris* has described Ruiz as "one girl to follow," praising her musical accomplishments in *Hercules and Love Affair*, and *Jessica 6*, while also omitting any mention of her gender or racial identity in the blurb.[358] The black and white photograph of Ruiz used in the write-up is racy and highly sexualized. In a pose reminiscent of early Brooke Shields's Calvin Klein advertisements from the 1980s, Ruiz is wearing denim, suggestively buttoned down a few inches below the navel, and a sheer top tied below her breasts, where her nipples can clearly be

[356] To some, transness is also a site of excess, where the body exists in proportions and dimensions that exceed the parameters of normative embodiment.

[357] Negron-Muntaner argues in her discussion of both Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin that an attention to Boricua body fixates on body parts—Jennifer's butt and Ricky's hips, in this case—contributes to a discourse that sets up the Boricua subject as a failed American subject, unworthy of citizenship. The Boricua subject is queered because she is simultaneously considered 'too much,' and yet 'lacking.' See Frances Negron-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans And The Latinization Of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 13, 228-271.

[358] See Pierre Groppo, "Nomi Ruiz: Big in Brooklyn," *Vogue Paris*. Transated by Kate Matthams-Spencer, Feb 20, 2012.

seen through the fabric. The grayscale of the photo makes her normally pale skin seem even more so, as if *Vogue* is intentionally framing Ruiz's body within European standards of beauty that idealize pale skin, a slim figure, and long, straight hair. Here the 'excess' of Boricua must be tamed, while the 'excesses' of transness must be highlighted and emphasized (i.e. visible breasts, nearly revealing her genitals). Consider this image from *Vogue Paris* in contrast to one of Ruiz's own promotional images for Jessica 6 (see figure 4). Here Ruiz is captured as a tall, statuesque figure wearing a draping of fabric that seemingly inflates around her upper body and shoulders, creating a visual effect that looks like she is donning a slick black heart. The exposed skin in the photograph serve to draw our attention to the tallness of Ruiz, the length of her legs, and the strong vertical line that the image of her body poses. Perhaps this image is less traditionally 'sexy' and more avant-garde, but it signals the ways in which Ruiz performs her own body and identity in ways that are different from *Vogue Paris's* interpretation of her. In this *Jessica 6* promotional image, Ruiz denies focus on her breasts or crotch—highly signified areas of the body for trans women—and instead chooses to draw our attention elsewhere. And yet, the image is grand, theatrical, artistic, excessive—on its own terms. Boricua performance is usually haunted by expectations of bodily excess, zeroing in on particular affectations, gestures, and proportions to queer the racialized body.[359] The crucial difference between these two images is that one was created by *Vogue Paris*, and one was part of Ruiz's own musical project, *Jessica 6*. While *Vogue Paris* chooses to flatten and whiten these same particularities of identity, Ruiz's own imagery expands and reinterprets these contrasting demands of excess.

[359] Negron-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 228-271.

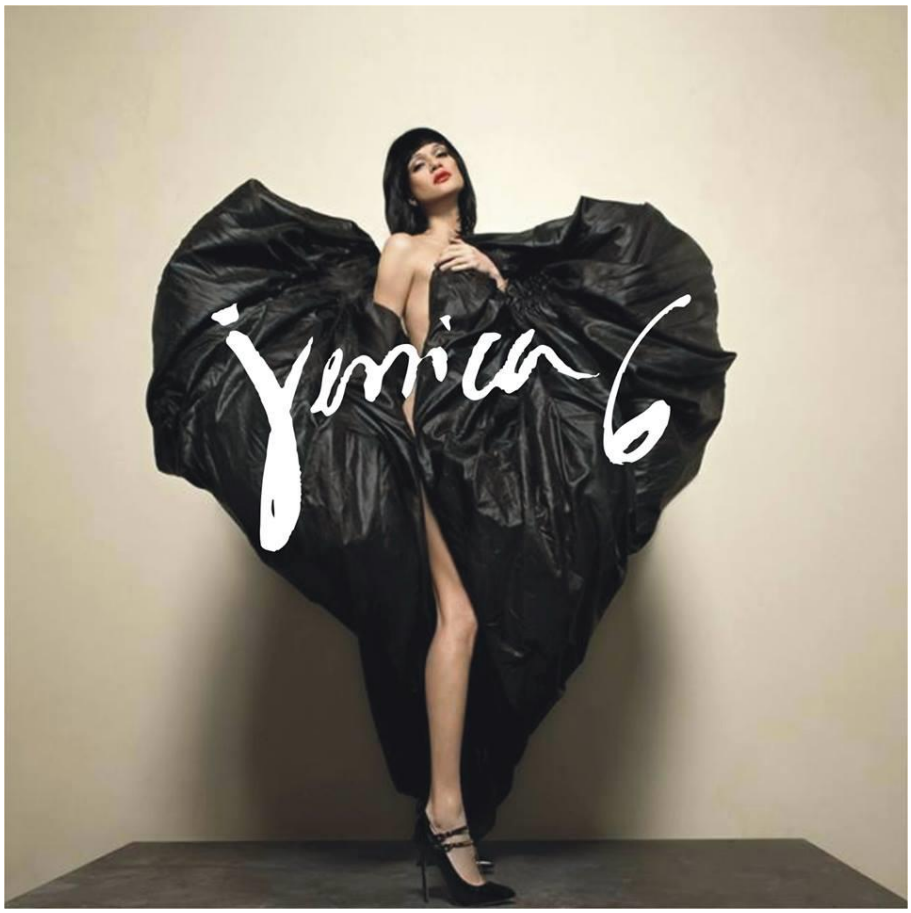


Figure 5 - Jessica 6 promotional image - *Jessica 6* Facebook page – posted 14 August 2014

Nomi's Place – Locating the Trans Body

Looking at theories of movement and space help us to better understand how Ruiz situates and stages the demands which face her bodily identities. And it is movement which is the central concern within Michel De Certeau's "Walking In the City," where walking becomes the object of close analysis, revealing itself to be intricately connected to the performative process of subject formation. To De Certeau, walking is the performative act that creates the felt, kinetic sense of spatiality within the realm of the urban, and walking also carries a gestural quality that functions as a kind of speech act, adding substance and shape to space—a kind of habituated practice and understanding.[360] He also marks walking as a crucial form of movement

[360] Michel De Certeau. *The Practice Of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1988, c1984), 99-101.

that references a specific relationship to *place*, not only *space*, where *place* is *space* made relational and sensorial. He says, "To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations...compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric..."[361] The concurrent and simultaneous placeless bodies walking through the city constitute the urban as such, where each subject is assumedly *seeking* a place at the end of their walk. But, don't certain subjects feel this lack of placeness more indefinitely, more poignantly, especially if they are trans? The process of walking that is crucial to the way De Certeau theorizes performativity and subject formation is surely more complicated for trans subjects, for whom walking in the city is not without risk or danger. If transness is choreographic, situated through bodies moving through space, what happens when movement or moving is dangerous, when walking through the city is a risk one takes because other subjects do not know how to react or respond to your body without violence or aggression? Genet's *Prisoner of Love* and Jessica 6's song by the same name again become relevant, as the image of the prison reemerges, prompting us to think about the everyday structures of confinement and spatial dangers that face trans subjects. How does such confinement or precarity of movement affect the process of subject-making for transgender persons? How do trans subjects still find ways to move and shape themselves? Likewise, how can trans bodies form or find a sense of placeness in an often-urban spatial setting that makes a trans subject cautious, afraid, watchful?

[361] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99-101.

Indeed, this is the main philosophical question that guides Gayle Salamon's study on transgender embodiment. In sifting through feminist philosophies as a way to think about transness and the trans body, Salamon understands space as less important than *place* in the construction or understanding of bodies, in some ways similar to De Certeau's claim, above.[362] Place, to Salamon, is relational, since it: "stands as a testament to the fact that two bodies cannot share the same space. Place is the marker of the bounded and separate identity of the two bodies, and only by virtue of this does space become transmogrified into place."[363] Bodies understand the proximity between one and another through space, which is what makes place a useful way to think about how bodies form and materialize. Salamon, in thinking through Irigaray and Aristotle, sees place as a kind of spatial formation where otherness is encountered, and has a constitutive effect on the subject. More specifically, "place [is] where I confront the otherness of the other without annihilating or canceling that difference or replicating the other in my own image."[364] I want to suggest that we should think of *place* as the staging of *space*, where a spatial materiality has a specific subject forming effect based on the relationality between the subjects within the space. Place is space made meaningful. This is where the body engages with its surrounding and becomes formed. 'Otherness' is left intact, because it becomes the way in which I form and understand my own body. The main difference and form of otherness of interest to Salamon, obviously, is gendered or sexual difference, and the complicated ways in which trans bodies do or do not form through these spatial processes. This conversation is vital in order to reach an understanding of Ruiz and her performative practice, whose own body—I contend—

[362] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender And Rhetorics Of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 134.
[363] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 134.
[364] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 140.

forms and 'comes to' through this kinetic and choreographic establishment of *place* as a staging of *space*.

As Salamon continues and begins to discuss the feminist theories of Elizabeth Grosz, she reveals that transgender embodiment is considered a null-space that exists outside of, and apart from Grosz's purview and schematics for understanding (gendered and) sexual difference. Specifically,

> Grosz is simultaneously affirming the possibility of a body that transforms itself and its environment, a body that surpasses itself, a body that could become nearly anything, and express anxiety at the prospect of such a body. We must have limits, after all, else the materiality of the body be lost altogether. And the limit that no body can exceed, Grosz eventually concludes, is the limit of sexual difference…It is not that Grosz fails to consider the possibilities of sexual subject positions other than 'man' and 'woman': she explicitly states that any gradation in between male or female…cannot be theorized, because it is phenomenologically unlivable…And the evidence used to confirm this phenomenological unlivability is the experience of the transsexual. [365]

Salamon's discussion of Grosz shows us how the prospect of transgender embodiment stokes anxieties about the solidity (and solidarity) of bodies. Salamon sees these anxieties as indicative of the problems in attaching ontological status to a binary understanding of sexual difference. Thus, to Grosz, embodiments that move between 'man' and 'woman,' exist somewhere in the middle, or somewhere else entirely 'cannot be theorized, because it is phenomenologically unlivable.' So here we see Salamon point out that the oversights of a theoretical anxiety have instead become a cultural impossibility. While it is not Salamon's intention to throw feminist theories of embodiment 'under the bus,' she is trying to ask such scholarship to *update* itself to be able to develop theoretical tools for talking about gendered embodiments that exist outside of binary paradigms.[366] Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* speaks to how certain bodies do indeed

[365] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 149-152.
[366] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 168.

exist in zones of 'uninhabitability' or are 'unlivable,' and that these bodies rather serve to form the limit of the subject as it forms for those who *do not* exist in uninhabitable zones.[367] And yet, this theoretical quandary that Salamon has painstakingly revealed is potentially productive to an understanding of Ruiz's own performance of transgender embodiment on stage. I suggest that we consider what happens when a 'phenomenologically unlivable' body is kinesthetically and sonically forming itself on stage. That is, that we should consider the effects when a body that is considered to be an impossibility stands up, dances, and sings on stage. And furthermore, I want to ask what it might mean when an audience devoted to Ruiz, seeks out and searches for such an 'impossible' body? What are the intimacies of the impossible?

A body deemed to surpass the limits imposed upon it reeks of the sublime. The sublime always challenges our normal or rational faculties which form the boundaries of objects and bodies. A trans diva like Ruiz becomes sublime because her sensorial forming on stage through song, dance, and visuals presents a theoretical conundrum to certain feminist thinkers—as elucidated by Salamon. She is sensed and felt, but she is not supposed to be. If we return to Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, as he differentiates between the beautiful from the sublime, "The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries. The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought."[368] If trans bodies are phenomenologically untenable, it only is because they constitute themselves outside of what some consider normatively gendered or sexed bodily comportments, where 'boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present.' Through Kant, we see that the sublime can change these terms of signification, presenting new possibilities for conceiving of embodiment.

[367] See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits Of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xiii.
[368] Kant, *Critique*, 101-102.

Keep in mind, Ruiz and all other trans subjects *are not impossible*, they live and move as *real* social actors. My invocation of the sublime is not to instrumentalize or romanticize transgender subjectivity or embodiment, but rather to suggest that transness itself has social effects in the way trans persons navigate a theoretically precarious position within the cultural terrain. Flawlessness thus restages this precarity into a moment for Ruiz to restage transness itself into something tangible and sensorial. In other words, the choreographing and forming of trans embodiments reshapes and reforms the social terrain that produces them. The sublime, though, brings its own perils. As earlier cited, Kant states that part of how an evocation of sublime feeling functions is through attraction *and* repulsion.[369] While Ruiz's loyal audiences and admirers are drawn to her presence and energy, there are those who do not read her performance of self as flawless, and violently react to the reality of a woman of transgender origins.

'Take No Prisoners.' Walking Through the Warzone

This theoretical conversation surrounding movement that is so foundational to performance studies reveals the stakes of this chapter. The scholarship of Randy Martin and Andre Lepecki is by and large attempting to think of movement and choreography as potential alternative epistemologies for understanding the ontology of the body itself. Extrapolating on critical dance studies, Lepecki sees movement as an a priori condition of modernity and modern subjectivity, claiming and posing that "The inclusion of the kinetic into this political-ethical question of modern subjectivity brings us back to the problem of how to dance against the hegemonic fantasies of modernity, once those fantasies are linked to the imperative to constantly display mobility."[370] Lepecki here is most interested in the ways that modernity compels

[369] Kant, *Critique* 120
[370] André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and The Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

movement, and is thinking through stoppages and ruptures as moments of kinetic resistance to that imperative to move. For trans subjects, though, this presents a unique dilemma. Modernity asks for movement, yet restricts it, or makes such movement precarious for trans folk. We must then think critically about the challenges to movement faced by trans subjects, and Nomi Ruiz's own attempt to choreograph her own body through the stage offered to her in diva performance. However, we should not hastily subscribe to the idea that all movement is equally playing into an interpellative mobile modernity, because, as Martin suggests, movement is also the way we can think about a politics that is *in action* through embodiment.[371] It is worth mentioning that Ruiz herself is deeply aware of the risks associated with movement for trans bodies. On April 4th, 2016, on the blog portion of her website—where she occasionally shares song lyrics in-progress, or general thoughts and feelings in the form of poetry—we see a tonally different post that is a strikingly direct, personal, and painful reflection on the beginnings of the trial for the murder of Islan Nettles.[372] Her post is titled "I Declare War: Islan Nettles & Violence":

> The beautiful, young trans woman who had her life stripped away simply for walking down the street and living her truth. I see myself in Islan. I see my sisters in Islan as well. I've walked down those same streets as many of us have. As women of trans origin, the simple act of leaving our homes and walking down a New York sidewalk has become an act of war. Each day we walk in the shoes of warriors, brave yet afraid for what's coming up around the corner. [373]

Ruiz here speaks to the intense ways in which the maneuvering of space is often precluded to trans subjects, and the 'movement' that is considered to be constitutive of their identity, per Stryker and others, is actually highly precarious terrain. A walk through her own neighborhood became dangerous for Islan Nettles, where she was murdered at the hands of James Dixon,

[371] Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.
[372] Islan Nettles was a 21-year-old black trans woman who was murdered in 2013 in NYC. See Nico Lang, "James Dixon Pleads Guilty in Death of Islan Nettles," *The Advocate,* April 5, 2016.
[373] See Nomi Ruiz "I Declare War: Islan Nettles & Violence," *Parksiderecords* (blog), April 4, 2016.

whose sexual advance turned into violence upon confronting the reality of Nettles's trans identity.[374] Ruiz above compares the all-too-frequent realities of violence against trans bodies to the life of a warrior confronting the battlefield on the daily, 'brave yet afraid.' For Ruiz, these are the feelings that constitute her queer and brown body, reminiscent of how Sandra Ruiz claims that "Subjects, in this case, come to know one another through their negation in life, as if these fragmented subjects link bodily forces, and build a signifying chain of perceived completion… Brownness is about feeling, perceiving, doing, emoting, and sensing…"[375] These feelings of simultaneous pride and terror—to Ruiz—are not only the conditions of being a trans woman of color in NYC, but they act as a kind of emotional girding up for battle. On this same blog entry, Ruiz shares her own battle with violence, recalling a time when she was attacked for being trans. She reflects that,

> I escaped that night but the scars remain. Others haven't been so fortunate. How twisted to find fortune in survival, but this is our truth. Staying alive is a luxury not many of us can afford and living a life outside of the darkness, shining bright in our truth has become an act of rebellion. The streets, our war zone and our lives at times is the price we pay. So shine bright and brave precious little diamonds, for there is no choice in evolution. We are soldiers and the first shots of war rang loud and proud when we stepped into our truth. Take no prisoners.[376]

Ruiz says several important and powerful things in this reflection. Here I turn again to Eva Hayward's important work on the spatiality of transness, who states that "'Errors' (which can be felt as 'non-passing') may occur, but even that occurrence is an enactment of possibility, of future states that we may yet become."[377] Ruiz's above use of the colloquialism of 'truth' in 'shining bright in our truth' refers specifically to an embracing one's trans identity, and signals a 'true' self that one is interested in becoming or moving into. To Ruiz, such 'truth' always goes

[374] Lang, "James Dixon Pleads Guilty."
[375] Ruiz, "Waiting in the Seat of Sensation," 345.
[376] Ruiz, "I Declare War: Islan Nettles & Violence."
[377] Hayward, "Spider City Sex," 244.

hand in hand with the threat of violence, a reminder of Hayward's assertion that the perception of such 'errors' are always connected to new ways of living in a trans body. Ruiz claims that 'stepping into our truth' marks the sound of battle, the movement marking the place where life becomes precarious. Her own personal experience with violence against her is rearticulated into a defiant stance. And, I am again reminded of Genet's *Prisoner of Love*, and his reflection on the trans body as heroic. As earlier cited, "Transsexuals are heroines. In our devotions they speak familiarly with saints, martyrs and criminals of both sexes, and with heroes and heroines…If [she] doesn't die, anyone who becomes a hero carries a lighted candle around on [her] head for the rest of [her] life, night and day"[378] This reflection of Genet's suggests that survival in the face of imprisonment is the process that creates heroes and heroines. Movement, choreography, and performance is the process by which Ruiz is able to light this candle atop her head that Genet must imagine is present. To Ruiz, the streets of the city and the stages within it are both the sites of possibility for her movement and formation, and a prison-like grid that makes movement precarious and subject to violence. She ends her above blog post with 'Take no prisoners,' while the post's title begins with 'I declare war.' Recall her performance at Mercury Lounge, where Ruiz demanded the audience assert with her that, "I am not a prisoner!" which has now transformed into 'Take no prisoners!' What does this mean, to take no prisoners, when one is so often characterized as vulnerable, living under the threat or fear of violence? This final demand by Ruiz fits into similar acts of refusal and defiance that Divas both allow for and embrace. If Ruiz cannot singlehandedly end violence against trans women of color, what can she do – what does her own body and performance work allow for, given all of this?

[378] Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 150.

Ruiz allows for a site of bodily formation that the city precludes or makes precarious for the trans body. For Ruiz, a subject that is read as excessive and queer on multiple registers, her performance work is what allows her to—through gesture, vocal vibration, and precise choreographic steps—move into her 'truth,' and reclaim moments of space and place that feel free of precarity. This allows the trans body to become tangible, felt, embodied, as opposed to a phenomenological or theoretical impossibility. A choreography of transness allows for a multiplicity of trans identities, ones that are not always about moving from one gender identity into another, but the ability to move and dance across the space of the city as a means of embodiment. Divas are always in a process of staging themselves in a way that reconfigures understandings of queer and racialized bodies. When Ruiz is moving flawlessly in-sync with her dancers on stage at Mercury Lounge, this staging of her own body allows her to build and access a felt sense of place; as such, it is useful to return to De Certeau here, who states that, "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. 'I feel good here.' The well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice."[379] This passage compellingly reminds us that place is essentially felt in the body. What histories or pasts, pains or pleasures might a trans subject need to be able to say 'I feel good here?' This statement, as De Certeau claims above, again reiterates that subjectivity is felt through a combination of movement and temporality, creating an embodied spatial practice that becomes place. Thus, flawlessness allows for a momentary incontestation of place and the body, a moment of confluence for the two, where Ruiz might 'feel good here.'

[379] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

Ruiz's performance of her truth is a performance of the sublime, and it offers us another way to think about flawlessness as the choreographic movement out of confinement and into one's truth. Truth to Ruiz is moving from a culturally or theoretically uninhabitable identity into one that is made possible on stage. Juana Maria Rodriguez beautifully speaks to the power of divas in *Queer Latinidad*, hinting at their sublime potentials, offering some insight into how we might think about Ruiz as performing both refusal and possibility. Rodriguez insists that "*Divas* are a breathing, swishing, eruption of the divine, a way of being in the world, of claiming power as movement, glances, voice, body, and style."[380] Rodriguez implicitly here states that divas must *move*, through breath, swish, eruption! And, that such movement is 'divine,' otherworldly, sublime. Ruiz maneuvers herself this same way, becoming sublime with the knowledge that the trans body *has always* been possible. Nomi is a performer of this same trans body that has troubled feminist theory, she is the same trans body that has been subject to trouble—in violence, fear and threats—and it is her trans body that configures itself on stage and in the city. Her steps, her songs, her beauty are the realities that cannot be faced by some, and are the same things that bring her and other trans persons violence and erasure. Dance and movement are how she can transform and mobilize the affects of shame that attach themselves to her Boricua and trans identity.[381]. Ruiz endures as a diva and creates possible futures for transness and brownness through this process of shaping the affective and the sensorial.[382] Her own body forms, feels, and becomes kinetic. She moves in and out of space and place, in step, cognizant of her position at the margins of identity. Ruiz assumes the role of the diva to take this position of impossibility and twist it in such a way that she can create a felt sense of place in her own body, drenched in

[380] Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 24.
[381] Negron Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 228-271.
[382] See Ruiz, "Waiting in the Seat of Sensation," 342.

queer intimacies that sculpt and shape the places in which she performs. Ruiz's performance of the sublime through flawlessness tells us that not only do divas themselves move, but they incite movement and possibilities that gesture to worlds apart from prisoner status and the dangers of movement for queer and brown subjects. Flawlessness is more than a stylization of the body, it shows us how Ruiz inhabits historical pasts, presents, and futures—locations in which she is both absent and present. As divas do, she makes and sculpts a felt-sense of her body on stage as much as she makes and sculpts a felt sense of queerness in the audience that dances and listens in kind. That is, the diva here in Ruiz refuses the expected comportments of the body, and instead shows you *her* bodily choreography. So then, we repeatedly and continually find that diva performance serves to allow for possibilities of embodiment for the feminine that have been historically or culturally precluded. She makes the trans body something that is *real* while negotiating and redirecting the demands of *realness* into something flawless. Flawlessness takes the formless potential of the sublime and through its movement brings possibility and form to a body considered impossible, bound, or imprisoned.

The predicament of the sublime is that it exists as a theoretical impossibility – the thing that should not be. Yet it *is*, it does not rest in the realm of the impossible. The sublime is a perceptual impossibility, not an actual impossibility. The immensity of the night sky is real, the vastness of the earth seen from the mountaintop is real. The diva is real. The trans body is real. The brown or black body is real. The instinct to think of the sublime as a violence to the imagination is merely legerdemain, behind the perceived violence to our imagination is a sublime expansion of our imagination to include what we have seen or sensed in this sensory and affective magnitude. Paradoxically, the expansion of the sublime allows us to understand difference, to somewhat incorporate it into ourselves. So the sublime *is*, and it evokes and

propels a fantastic sensorium at its audience. Just as queerness or brownness is continually swept away or paved over in attempts to 'clean up' cities or publics, there are those who desperately crave contact with the queer sublime, a confirmation of queer possibilities in a heteronormative world. When an audience like those in Mercury Lounge seeks and confront the diva on stage—Nomi Ruiz—there is a feeling of queer recognition. Bodies return the touch, gaze, and voice of each other – and remind each other that they are not impossible. This sublime touching is powerful and pleasurable, and it is this feeling that divas like Ruiz evoke to propel queerness into new futures and destinies.

REFERENCES

"A Pregnant Grace Jones: Bigger and Better than Ever." *Billboard*. 91: 44. 1979. 64-65.

Adorno, Theodor W.. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984.

Agrawal, Nadya. "Watch The Video For "The Light," A Posthumous Collaboration Between J Dilla And Nomi Ruiz." *Paper Magazine*. June 17, 2016.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Ahmed, Sara. "Interview with Judith Butler." *Sexualities* 19, no. 4 (2016): 482-492.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Andriote, John-Manuel. *Hot Stuff: A Brief History of Disco.* New York: HarperEntertainment, 2001.

Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Bagli, Charles. "Mayor Claims Credit for Times Sq. Revival." *The New York Times.* January, 2000.

Bailey, Marlon M.. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, And Ballroom Culture in Detroit.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2013.

Baker, Houston A. *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Barthes, Roland. *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, And Representation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.

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

Bond, Sarah. “Whitewashing Ancient Statues: Whiteness, Racism and Color in the Ancient World.” *Forbes*. April 27, 2017.

Boulware, Hugh. “Grace Jones: A Down-To-Earth ‘Freak.’” *Chicago Tribune*. Dec 27, 1989. C1.

Brady, Jacqueline. “Pumping Iron with Resistance: Carla Dunlap’s Victorious Body.” In *Recovering The Black Female Body: Self-representations By African American Women.* Edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, 253-278. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Bredbeck, Gregory W. “Troping the Light Fantastic: Representing Disco Then and Now.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 71-107.

Brekke, Kira. “Musician Nomi Ruiz On What It’s Like To Be Trans In The Music Industry.” *Huffpost Live*. Online video clip. *The Huffington Post.* December 19, 2015.

Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Brown, Sterling A. *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. Chicago: TriQuarterly Books, 1989.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Sublime And Beautiful*. London: Routledge Classics, 2008.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits Of "sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Canuel, Mark. *Justice, Dissent, And The Sublime*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

Carby, Hazel. “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues.” In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. Edited by Robert G. O’Meally, 468-482. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Cather, Willa. “A Gold Slipper.” *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Cather, Willa. “Paul’s Case.” *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Cather, Willa. *The Song of the Lark.* New York: Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1999 [1915].

Cather, Willa. “Three American Singers.” *McClure's Magazine*, December 1913: 33-48.

Cerankowski, Karli June1. "Queer Dandy Style: The Cultural Politics of Tim Gunn's Asexuality." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1/2 (2013): 226-244.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice Of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1988, c1984.

Chapman, Erin D. *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, And Popular Culture in The 1920s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, And the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and The Modern Surface*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Chidester, Phil. "May The Circle Stay Unbroken: Friends, The Presence Of Absence, And The Rhetorical Reinforcement Of Whiteness." *Critical Studies In Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 157-174.

Cvetovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Cuomo, Chris J. and Kim Q. Hall. “Introduction: Reflections on Whiteness.” In *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections*. Edited by Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hal, 1-15. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

Dall, Christine, dir. *Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues.* Calliope Film Resources, 1989. VHS.

Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, And Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

Delany, Samuel R. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

D’Emilio, John, “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, 467-476. New York: Routledge, 1993.

DeSantis, A.D. “Selling the American Dream Myth to black southerners: The Chicago Defender and the great migration of 1915-1919.” (1998) *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 474-511.

Drewal, Margaret Thompson. “The Camp Trace in Corporate America: Liberace and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall.” In *The Politics And Poetics Of Camp,* edited by Moe Meyer, 149-181. London: Routledge, 1994.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1961 [1903].

Dyer, Richard. *The Culture of Queers*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. London: Educational Advisory Service, British Film Institute, 1979.

Dyer, Richard. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Echols, Alice. *Hot Stuff: Disco and The Remaking Of American Culture*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.

Edgecomb, Sean F. *Charles Ludlam Lives: Charles Busch, Bradford Louryk, Taylor Mac, and the Queer Legacy of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2017.

Elliott, Mark. *The Ministry of Pop: The Stock Aitken Waterman Story*. London: Flood Gallery Publishing, 2016.

Eng, David L, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?." *Social Text* 23, no. 3/4 (2005): 1-17.

Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness." *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles L. Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Farmer, Brett. "The Fabulous Sublimity Of Gay Diva Worship." *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 59 (2005): 164-195.

Farrell, Sherrie. "Grace Jones Role Unattractive In Bond Flick: Review." *The New Pittsburgh Courier*. June 22, 1985. 2.

Fiol-Matta, Licia. *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017.

Fleetwood, Nicole R. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, And Blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Frank, Gillian. "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 276-306.

Frankenberg, Ruth. “The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness.” In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. Edited by Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray, 72-96. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Genet, Jean. *Prisoner of Love.* Transated by Barbara Bray. London: Pan Books, 1989.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

“Grace Jones: From Europe’s Model to Disco Diva.” *The New Pittsburgh Courier*. July 22, 1978. 18.

Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Kiesling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. 2011. PDF.

Greene, Nikki A.. "The Feminist Funk Power of Betty Davis and Renée Stout." *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 57-76.

Groppo, Pierre. “Nomi Ruiz: Big in Brooklyn.” *Vogue Paris*. Transated by Kate Matthams-Spencer. Feb 20, 2012.

Goldberg, Jonathan. *Willa Cather and Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

Halberstam, Michael. “Hannah Arendt on the Totalitarian Sublime and Its Promise of Freedom.” In *Hannah Arendt In Jerusalem*. Edited by Steven E. Aschheim, 105-124. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Hall, Stuart. “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, no 1-2 (1993): 104-114.

Halperin, David M.. *How To Be Gay*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

"Hammerstein Ballroom." *QRO*. qromag.com.

Hayward, Eva. "Spider city sex." *Women & Performance* 20, no. 3 (2010): 225-251.

Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Holleran, Andrew. *Dancer from the Dance*. New York: Morrow, 1978.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

Hudson, Nicholas J. "Musical beauty and information compression: Complex to the ear but simple to the mind?." *BMC Research Notes* 4, no. 1 (January 2011): 9-17.

Hughes, Langston. "If You Remember These Things Then Gimme Five." *The Chicago Defender*. Feb 9, 1952. 10.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Jennex, Craig. "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia." *Popular Music & Society* 36, no. 3, (2013): 343-359.

Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/performing The Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Jones, Grace. *Grace Jones Hurricane: Return to Roseland*. Performance. Roseland Ballroom, New York. Oct 27, 2012.

Jones, Grace. *[Untitled Halloween Performance]*. Performance. Roseland Ballroom: New York. Oct 1978.

Jones, Grace, and Paul Morley. *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*. New York: Gallery Books, 2015.

Kant, Immanuel. *Kant's Critique of Judgement,* translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard. 2nd ed. Revised. London: Macmillan, 1914.

Kant, Immanuel. *Observations On The Feeling Of The Beautiful And Sublime*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.

Kelling, George. "How New York Became Safe: The Full Story." *City Journal*. The Manhattan Institute. n.d. 2009.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, And The Mystery Of Desire*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1993.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Krahulik, Karen C. "A Class Act: Ryan Landry and the Politics of Booger Drag." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1-30.

Kuga, Mitchell. "Capricorn Rising: Jessica 6's Nomi Ruiz prepares for her upcoming New Year's Eve show." *Next Magazine*. Next Magazine. Dec 23, 2015.

Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, And America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Kutulas, Judy. "You Probably Think This Song Is About You: 1970s Women's Music from Carole King to the Disco Divas." *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in The 1970s.* edited by Sherrie Inness 172-193. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

"KylieLover7." "Kylie Minogue - Aphrodite Les Folies Tour 2011 - Full Live 1080p." YouTube Video, 2:00:13. July 12, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqMmRX83RqI

La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence M. *Queer Ricans: Cultures And Sexualities In The Diaspora*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Lang, Nico. "James Dixon Pleads Guilty in Death of Islan Nettles." *The Advocate.* April 5, 2016.

Lawrence, Tim. *Love Saves The Day: A History Of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Leigh, Spencer. "Obituaries: Little Eva." *The Independent*. April 11, 2003.

Leonardi, Susan J.,Pope, Rebecca A. *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Lepecki, André. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and The Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Lieb, Sandra R. *Mother of The Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Lindemann, Marilee. *Willa Cather, Queering America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Lindsay, Richard A.. *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from The Silent Era To The Modern Day*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club. 1984.

Lyotard, Jean François. *Lessons on The Analytic of The Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [sections] 23-29*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

"Ma In Gotham." *The Chicago Defender*. Oct. 18, 1924. 7.

Manalansan IV, Martin F. "The "Stuff" Of Archives." *Radical History Review* 120 (2014): 94-107.

Markovitz, Adam. “Kylie Minogue talks about her new tour, her craziest outfits, and Paula Abdul.” *Entertainment Weekly*. May 9, 2009.

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

Martin, Randy. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

McMillan, Uri. “Nicki-aesthetics: the camp performance of Nicki Minaj.” *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 1-9.

McMillan, Uri. *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art And Performance*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Meyer, Moe, “Introduction.” In *The Politics And Poetics Of Camp,* edited by Moe Meyer, 1-22. London: Routledge, 1994.

Michaeli, Ethan. *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America: From The Age Of The Pullman Porters To The Age Of Obama*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2016.

Michelson, Noah. “Crazy for Kylie.” *Out Magazine*. Aug 2010. 62-69.

Minogue, Kylie. *For You, For Me*. Performance. Hammerstein Ballroom: New York. Oct 12, 2009.

Minogue, Kylie. *Les Folies/Aphrodite*. Performance. Patriot Center: Fairfax, VA. April 30, 2011.

Montlack, Michael. “Stevie Nicks: ‘And Wouldn’t You Love to Love Her?’” *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on The Women Who Inspire Them,* edited by Michael Montlack, 197-202. Madison: Terrace Books, 2009.

Moore, Madison. *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric.* New Haven: Yale University Press. 2018.

Moore, Madison. "Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012): 71-86.

Moore, Marie. "The Many Fascinating Facets of Bald and Beautiful Grace Jones." *New York Amsterdam News*. December 3 1977. 36.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

"MsVoroninnik." "Jessica 6 Prisoner of Love Marquee 07.11.2013." YouTube Video, 00:39. January 2, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmnXubK5Xm8

Muñoz, José Esteban *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance Of Politics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, The Performativity of Race, And The Depressive Position." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-688.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans And The Latinization Of American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

O'Neal, Chas. "In Old Kay See." *The Chicago Defender.* July 18, 1925. 6.

Parédez, Deborah. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, And The Performance Of Memory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Pellegrini, Ann. *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Peters, Gerhard and John T. Woolley. "Press Release - Mayor Giuliani Cleaned Up New York City." *The American Presidency Project*. July 18, 2007

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics Of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Powell, D.A. "Eartha Kitt: 'Purrrfectly Detached.'" *My Diva: 65 Gay Men On The Women Who Inspire Them*, edited by Michael Montlack, 94-98. Madison: Terrace Books, 2009.

"Prove It On Me Blues." *The Chicago Defender*. September 22. 1928. 7.

Ratliff, Ben. "Coming in for a Landing After All These Years." *The New York Times*. Oct. 14, 2009.

Rechy, John. *City of Night*. New York: Grove Press, 1984, c1963.

Rhyne, Ragan. "Racializing White Drag." *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3/4 (2004): 181-194.

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

Roach, Joseph R.. *It*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Robertson, Pamela. "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity', and The Discourse of Camp." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 393-408. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Robinson, Peter. "Groove is in the Art." *The Guardian*. Feb 22, 2008.

Rockwell, John. “Grace Jones, Cult Darling, Returns, Miming Tableaux of Dominance.” *The New York Times*. September 26, 1977. 43.

Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, And Other Latina Longings*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.

Ross, Andrew. “Uses of Camp.” In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics And The Performing Subject : A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 308-329. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Royster, Francesca T. *Sounding Like A No-no?: Queer Sounds And Eccentric Acts In The Post-soul Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Ruiz, Nomi. *Jessica 6 Live.* Performance. Mercury Lounge: New York. November 6, 2013.

Ruiz, Nomi. “Patricia Field’s legendary boutique…” Facebook Post. December 8, 2015. https://m.facebook.com/nomi.ruiz.9/posts/876167725824776

Ruiz, Nomi. “I Declare War: Islan Nettles & Violence.” *Parksiderecords* (blog), April 4, 2016**.**

Ruiz, Sandra. “Waiting in the seat of sensation: the Brown existentialism of Ryan Rivera.” *Women & Performance* 25, no. 3 (2007): 336-352.

Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming A Body: Transgender And Rhetorics Of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Scheper, Jeanne. *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, And Remembering The Modern Stage*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Scott, Darieck. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, And Sexuality in The African American Literary Imagination*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Shank, Barry. *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2014.

Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Sheridan, Simon. *The Complete Kylie*. London: Titan Books, 2012.

Smith, Rubert. "A Brief History of Camp: From Shakespeare to SuBo." *Attitude*. July 2010.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and The Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and The Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 53-65. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Stern, William J. "The Truth About Times Square." *Institute for Justice*. April 21, 2009. https://ij.org/report/the-truth-about-times-square/ accessed Nov 30, 2015.

Stewart-Baxter, Derrick. *Ma Rainey and The Classic Blues Singers*. New York: Stein and Day, 1970.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008.

Suárez, Juan A.. "The Puerto Rican Lower East Side and the Queer Underground." *Grey Room* 32, (2008): 6–37.

Talley, André Leon, and Andy Warhol. “New Again: Grace Jones.” *Interview*. July 16, 2014, reprint from Oct 1984 issue.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive And The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory In The Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Teague, J. E. "The Recording Studio on Stage: Liveness in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 555-571.

Tongson, Karen. *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

“TSRiviera.” “KYLIE MINOGUE Live @ Splash, NYC! pt.1.” YouTube Video, 7:34. Jun 6, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ujNE4GXbeg

“TSRiviera.” “KYLIE MINOGUE Live @ Splash, NYC! pt.2.” YouTube Video, 10:01. Jun 6, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y6aYqxoKzM

Tuan, Yi-fu. *Passing Strange And Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, And Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press for Shearwater Books, 1993.

Vaccaro, Jeanne. “Felt Matters.” *Women & Performance* 20, no. 3 (2010): 253-266.

Visco, Gerry. “Premier and Interview: ‘Life or C.R.E.A.M.,’ Nomi Ruiz.” *Interview*. September 18, 2013.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York : Pocket Books, 1985.

Walters, Barry. “Private Life: The Compass Point Sessions.” *The Advocate*. June 9, 1998.

Walters, Barry. “As Much As I Can, As Black As I Am: The Queer History Of Grace Jones.” *Pitchfork*. August 25, 2015.

Warhol, Andy, dir. *Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes*. Ep 2. 1987. The Andy Warhol Museum: Pittsburgh.

Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.

Watson, Veronica T. *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013.

Weheliye, Alexander G.. *Habeas Viscus : Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Weinstein, Steve. "Does Roseland Ballroom's Demise End the Era of the Manhattan Megaclub?" *The Village Voice*. April 2014.

Wilson, August, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York: Plume, the Penguin Group. 1985.

Wong, Edward. "Cultures Clash Where Divas Once Held Stage." *The New York Times*. May 16, 2000.

Woodress, James Leslie. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

"Xellery." "Kylie - Live In New York (Full concert DVD edit)." YouTube Video, 1:44:05. December 12, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9EMYDUc1Kg