BORN (AGAIN) THIS WAY:
POPULAR MUSIC, GLBTQ IDENTITY, AND RELIGION

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This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between religion and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (GLBTQ) identity in the United States as revealed and complicated through popular music. It is based upon three case studies consisting of the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade, the musical voice of the GLBTQ community as portrayed through gay anthems and historical gay icons, and pop star Lady Gaga’s music and concert “The Monster Ball.” These three case studies build upon one another in order to further contextualize each other: the Chicago Gay Pride Parade uses music in order to redefine spaces in Chicago, the musical voice builds upon the concept of “gay” anthems by female singers, and Lady Gaga is one of the most popular contemporary gay icons. I completed much of the research for this project through ethnographic methods of participant observation and several interviews with community insiders.

I examine the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade as a ritualesque event that allows for personal and societal transformations needed in order to promote acceptance of GLBTQ individuals within the United States and as a celebration of a range of identities. By reflecting on my own and others’ experiences as parade attendees and participants, I analyze music’s role in the creation of a safe space that is necessary for these transformations. This study also reveals how the GLBTQ rights movement’s aims and goals draw extensively on narratives of the American Dream, with its focus on narratives
of transformation, since the movement’s aims are on transforming the GLBTQ community’s role in the United States.

Next, to show certain strategic, political aims of the GLBTQ community, I explore the musical voices with which it has identified. More often than not, GLBTQ individuals do not turn to their own voices in choosing their musical anthems but rather the voices of non-GLBTQ individuals, in a manner that I understand as strategic identification. I detail how examining the chosen voices can provide insights into the GLBTQ community. I reveal the way that black musical practices influence popular music now and historically, influencing the current gay anthems. I suggest that gay men identify with voices influenced by these black musical practices in to strategically connect the GLBTQ rights movement with the African American civil rights movement.

Finally, I explore Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language in her support of her GLBTQ fans and detail the political implications of this language. Her language reveals the importance of religious rhetoric in the United States and connects her to a larger history where religion becomes a key component of American identity and reinserts GLBTQ individuals into this discursive framework.
I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Americans who find themselves between two communities or two identities.
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On March 8, 2012 I attended the Curators Bare All special event for the Chicago History Museum’s special exhibit “Out in Chicago.” An exhibit detailing the 150-year history of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people within the city of Chicago, “Out in Chicago” signifies how GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people and issues are becoming increasingly visible within American culture throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. At this event, co-curators Jill Austen and Jennifer Brian were joined by a special guest: famed sex advice columnist and gay rights advocate, Dan Savage, who was introduced simply as “some guy named Dan”—a clear indication that everyone in the room was expected to know who he was. At this event, Austen and Brian discussed their vision for the exhibit, focusing on the ways that gay history is Chicago history. GLBTQ Chicagoans, they reminded the audience, have always been a part of Chicago’s history, and the intention of their exhibit was to re-insert GLBTQ stories and experiences into a history that has written them out.

The most interesting moment of this presentation happened during the introductions. At that point, Jill Austen mentioned that in her time at the Chicago History Museum she has acted as curator on two exhibits: “Out in Chicago” and “Catholic in Chicago.” On hearing this, Dan Savage quickly responded, “I would love to see the Venn diagram of those two issues,” gesturing with his hands that they would not actually overlap. Austen quickly responded, “Actually, there was quite a bit of overlap between the two,” to which Savage responded, “yeah, most likely a lot of closeted, sad individuals” (quotes paraphrased from fieldnotes, March 8, 2012).
The above story reveals two key features in the aims and narratives of GLBTQ experience in contemporary United States: first, it highlights that GLBTQ individuals are working hard for inclusion into American society, often through rewriting, remapping and transforming already existing cultural forms (such as historical narratives at a history museum) so that they acknowledge GLBTQ individuals; and second, it brings to light a common discourse in this country that marks a happy GLBTQ life and religion as polar opposites. In the case of the latter, this is a narrative reiterated by both the political left and the political right. Dan Savage is vocally liberal and strongly supportive of GLBTQ rights. He has founded the “It Gets Better” project, a wildly popular YouTube video project intended to help prevent suicides by reminding GLBTQ high school students that their lives will improve. He is also famous for targeting Rick Santorum—a noted antigay, Catholic, Republican politician—by repeatedly associating his name with unsavory aspects of anal intercourse. Of course, Savage is also an out atheist in addition to being an out homosexual and sometimes urges—sometimes subtly, and sometimes more explicitly—his readers and podcast audience to drop their faith systems, which he perceives as psychologically damaging.

However, anyone who has attended the Chicago Gay Pride Parade can tell you that Dan Savage’s belief in the polarization of GLBTQ identity and religion is not the only narrative in this community. In my experiences as a participant observer in the Chicago Gay Pride Parade in 2011 (as well as 2010 and 2009, though I was not working as a researcher in those parades), I was surprised by the fact that many different religious groups, including many GLBTQ friendly synagogues, Christian churches of various denominations, and one Buddhist temple, were marching in support of GLBTQ rights. Dan Savage’s beliefs may represent a very real
experience in which a happy gay life was not possible within his Catholic upbringing; however, his is not the only story.

To investigate the second key issue brought up in my opening vignette—that GLBTQ individuals actively remap, rewrite, and transform preexisting cultural forms in order to include themselves in society, culture, and history—I turn to the work of José Esteban Muñoz. Writing about New York performance art traditions, Muñoz examines queer performance practices for their ability to transform ordinary and mundane objects and cultural practices into something extraordinary in a process that he refers to as disidentification (Muñoz 1999). In fact, in his book of that title, he places this transformative aspect of queer theater and art at the center of its purpose. I argue that, in this framework, popular music is vital to the process of reclaiming and transforming social spaces and cultural histories to include GLBTQ individuals and experiences.

In this thesis, I explore popular music’s role in remapping, rewriting, and transforming people and society to become more GLBTQ-friendly. More specifically, I will examine music’s role in negotiating the complicated relationship between religion and GLBTQ identity in the United States. In this way I hope to shed some new light on the complicated relationship between these two cultural sites that are so polarizing in American society. I will be grounding my thesis in three different case studies: the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade, the musical voice of the GLBTQ community, and Lady Gaga and her GLBTQ support provided through her music and “The Monster Ball” Tour.

A Note on GLBTQ

Expanding on the language used by Vicki L. Eaklor in her history of GLBT life in the United States, *Queer America* (2008), I use the term “GLBTQ”—Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender, and Queer—to describe the community I am discussing. Eaklor chooses “GLBT” over others such as “gay” or “gay and lesbian” or the designation “queer” alone, because (1) it represents a broadening of the identities included within the realm that was once known reductively as homosexual, (2) the term is “both current and historical…represent[ing] contemporary thought and the order in which activists have come to add terms to define their cause” (2008, 2), and (3) because the expression “queer”—a term that is currently being reappropriated within academe in Queer theory—still holds a level of stigma for many GLBT people. I, however, have chosen to include a “Q” for “queer” in order to include the individuals that I have met who actively identify themselves this way—the majority of whom are scholars.

**Background on Religion and GLBTQ Life**

The polarization of religion and GLBTQ life is a discourse prevalent in several veins of scholarship: historical studies, queer theory, and literature studies. Here, I will briefly examine some literature from each of these areas and detail how these works position religion and GLBTQ life in a dichotomous relationship. Then, I will consider an anthology edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray on the role of religion in GLBTQ life, *Gay Religion* (2005), to explore the implications of that dichotomy.

In the historical narrative, *Queer America: A GLBT History of The 20th Century* (2008), Vicki L. Eaklor marks two social issues as deeply involved in limiting the lives and histories of GLBTQ individuals: heterosexism and homophobia. Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is the default orientation, that one is heterosexual until proven otherwise. It is a concept that affects both contemporary individuals and historical figures who are also viewed through this lens, regardless of contemporaneous categorizations. Homophobia as defined by
Eaklor is “the fear and hatred of homosexuals” (2008, 4), and she examines its role in the exclusion of GLBTQ history. Eaklor does place Western religion, particularly Christianity, as one of the factors that leads to America’s heterosexism and homophobia.

Eaklor explores some of the nineteenth century changes and ideologies that contribute to our current societal heterosexism and homophobia, and she explains that colonial history of the Americas as well as the political, economic, and social revolutions of this time period are influential in forming these understandings. America’s colonial history adopted European ideals, including laws that were largely based on the Christian Bible and English common law (2008, 16). Eaklor argues that the colonial basis of laws upon Christian morals is unsurprising, considering that:

[t]his fit the prevailing view that (1) all people were inherently sinful and in need of control in order to preserve the social and moral order, and (2) the role of law was to uphold a Judeo-Christian version of morality. (2008, 17)

As such, all of the English colonies had laws against “buggery”—a term that, “included both sodomy (anal intercourse, whether male-male or male-female) and bestiality” (Eaklor 2008, 16). She continues to explain that the American Revolution lead to the rise of an American “civil religion” out of the desire to have a “virtuous citizenry” (2008, 20) in order to avoid the new republic falling into a “mobocracy” (2008, 20). This civil religion led to an atmosphere in which “‘sin’ could be treasonous, or at least politically suspect; now ‘good’ citizenship virtually required profession of Christianity” (2008, 20). This atmosphere also saw acts such as same-sex intercourse as inherently anti-American due to their immorality within Judeo-Christian based laws.
However, Eaklor’s history does not always place religion and religious narratives as the polar opposite of GLBTQ movements. She places many of the reform movements—GLBTQ rights included—into the historical context of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is a type of nationalism that addresses the dual notions of America’s need to succeed as a republic and its self-appointed identity as God’s chosen people. This form of nationalism has led many 20th and 21st century reform movements to draw upon methods similar to those of Evangelical preachers, hoping to not only change people’s thinking on a topic, but the way that they feel on a topic (Eaklor 2008, 21-22). The GLBTQ rights movement currently uses a method very similar, asking people to feel that it is appropriate to offer full rights to GLBTQ individuals because this is the “right thing to do.” Furthermore, she devotes several pages to the growing acceptance of GLBTQ individuals within certain religious groups starting in the 1960s in America (2008, 136-138).

In the early years of Queer theory, Michel Foucault also positioned religion and GLBTQ lives as incongruent. He argued that discourse about sexuality is used as a means to discipline people into behaving in particular fashions in regards to their sexuality. This discourse is generated, often in the form of a confession, or, as he would put it, “the confession of the flesh” (Foucault 1978, 19). For Foucault, the Western penchant for confession comes from the Catholic Church’s tradition of penance, where people were urged to discuss their own sexuality at large in order to be freed from its power over them. Foucault argues that what was claimed as the means of freedom was actually the means through which people were oppressed:

This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex…and that this carefully analytical
discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself. (Foucault 1978, 23)

He positions the Catholic Church as one of the original perpetrators of this oppressive discourse, and thus it is unsurprising that Foucault would not see Western religion as supportive of GLBTQ lives. Though, it should be noted that Foucault would not single out only a religious organization as being unsupportive of GLBTQ life. Rather, Foucault would not see any modern institution—religious or otherwise—as supportive of GLBTQ identity.

In literature studies, Michael Cobb also explores religious rhetoric in regards to GLBTQ life. In his book *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (2006), Cobb explores the issue of religious hate speech towards GLBTQ individuals and provides a way of exploring how it becomes one of the key rhetorical strategies GLBTQ individuals use to solidify their connection to previous civil rights movements. Cobb discusses the mainstreaming of hate speech among Evangelical Christianity in the United States as a way of dealing with GLBTQ people (2006, 3), and locates the current use of hate speech within the historical context of the jeremiad—a type of Puritan sermon that lamented a lost time of “grace” and used one group of people as the scapegoat for this fall from “grace” (Cobb 2006, 7). He argues that Evangelical Christians are using the GLBTQ community as the new scapegoat to blame for what they view as America’s fall from grace—made manifest in issues such as the decline of the sanctity of marriage.

Furthermore, Cobb continues to argue that religious rhetoric is used prominently because it is both emotional and authoritative in America. Cobb argues that the special meaning—and authority—of religious language comes from a sense of security, since “religious language is
thought to be a secure form of language” (2006, 22). He continues to argue that the security of religious language stems from the fact that American Evangelicals believe “God’s word” to be infallible, thus giving security to the claims being made while invoking these words. While Evangelicals may not be the largest group in America, they are a powerful force in contemporary, conservative United States politics, as evidenced by both the Tea Party and George W. Bush. He draws these conclusions by examining a quote from the National Association of Evangelicals’ statement of faith, “We believe the Bible to be inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God” (The National Association of Evangelicals, quoted in Cobb 2006, 22). According to Cobb, the implications of the infallible notion of “God’s word” means that any argument made within a religious rhetoric automatically feels more authoritative, and therefore, is less like to be dismissed or challenged. In this way, religious rhetoric becomes a powerful tool for emotionally charged political arguments precisely because these rhetoric feel powerful and authoritative. And this is the reason that the conservative right has been using religious rhetoric against GLBTQ individuals.

However, it is important to note that religious rhetoric can be just as effective in support of GLBTQ individuals as it can be against them. The Westboro Baptist Church was not the only group that was invoking a religious rhetoric in their protests at hate crime victim Matthew Shepard’s funeral in Laramie, Wyoming in 2001. The anti-protestors against the church also used religious imagery of angels as “they dressed in angel costumes, with large, seven-foot-high wings, creating a visible barrier so one would not have to see signs such as ‘Fags Die God Laughs’” (Cobb 2006, 2). Matthew’s father also applied religious language in his comments to the court regarding his son’s death:
By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You [one of Shepard’s murderers] left him out there by himself, but he wasn’t alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You’re probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark’s in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew’s in Laramie. He had God. (Dennis Shepard, quoted in Cobb 2006, 38)

Both the protestors in angel costumes as well as Dennis Shepard’s response using a religious rhetoric are highly emotionally charged, which is precisely why these rhetorics become effective. The emotions of these responses pull on the heartstrings and work to convince people not just through logic, but through a transformation of feelings, much as Eaklor describes reform movements in the United States (2008).

In addition to religious rhetoric being equally effective in condemning and supporting GLBTQ Americans (as seen in the above examples), one of the main problems with the dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ life is that it dismisses or undermines the spiritual or religious experience of many GLBTQ individuals. The book *Gay Religion* (2005), edited by Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, provides an excellent starting point for research within this
field. This book provides essays on such intersections of religion and GLBTQ issues as diverse as ex-gay ministries (Ponticelli), ritual theory perspectives on gospel hours at gay bars (Gray and Thumma), a ritual perspective of circuit parties similar to those of the Catholic Mass (Gorrell), and an analysis of gay Evangelicals (Thumma). While popular music does play a role in some of these articles, work on the intersection of popular music, GLBTQ identity, religion, and politics as in the study provided here begins to do, is a ripe area for study.

In this thesis, I argue that an analysis of popular music complicates the perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity in the United States. By exploring popular music’s role in the lives and events of GLBTQ Americans, I am able to show how religion and GLBTQ life are not polarized in the way that the dichotomy would suggest; rather, they are in a complicated relationship where each interacts with the other in the American political sphere. Popular music becomes a key site for identification in this way because it serves as a means of identification for some of the shared experiences of people within the GLBTQ community.

**Methods**

Being a project within ethnomusicology, this thesis is a cultural analysis based upon lived experience gained through ethnographic methods: much of the primary research was obtained through participant observation relevant to my three key case studies, and through interviews with individuals who are connected to Midwest GLBTQ communities, either through identifying as GLBTQ or through attendance at these events as allies. Allies—in this context—are straight identified individuals who support GLBTQ causes or are supportive of GLBTQ family and friends. While participant observation is my primary source of data collection, the interview process also provided me the opportunity to delve deeper into several personal narratives from
key participants, narratives that I believe reveal important insights into how music is connected to pivotal points in GLBTQ life in the United States. My fieldwork methodology has three major influences: Clifford Geertz’s concept of thick description from *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973); the anthropological method of radical empiricism as described by Tim Olaveson in his article “Transcendent Trancer” (2005); and Michelle Kisliuk’s argument for what she refers to as “an ethnography of performance” that highlights people’s experiences (2008).

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously argues for a view of culture as something that must be interpreted in order to be understood. In other words, the act of living in a culture requires an interpretation in order for those who are insiders to know what the particular actions mean in any given culture. As such, he advocates for a method of ethnographic writing that involves what he refers to as “thick description.” Thick description is the ethnographic act of writing as many contextualized details as possible about a culture in order to allow the writer and reader to make an informed interpretation of the work (Geertz 1973). I use thick description to keep my ethnography grounded in the lived experiences of the people in my study, treating all events as texts to be interpreted. Furthermore, since much of my own fieldwork is based upon participant observation, my insider status as a gay American allows me access to an insider’s interpretation of certain actions.

Building from the subjective, interpretive view of culture provided by symbolic anthropology’s thick description, Tim Olaveson urges scholars of fluid and changing cultures to use an anthropological method known as radical empiricism. Radical empiricism is a method originally coined by William James, that “includ(es) the widest possible range of human experience…and treat(s) one’s own experience as primary data” (Olaveson 2005, 207). By using
not only the experiences of “subjects” and “informants” as primary data, but also the investigator’s experiences, radical empiricism draws on all observations as valid sites of critical analysis of culture. I use radical empiricism to support my methods of drawing strongly on participant observation as well as drawing on my own life experiences as an insider within the community that I am researching as a site for analysis.

Michelle Kisliuk explores the influence of such trends in the fields of ethnomusicology and the humanities in general, stating “The renewed emphasis on experience…is moving us toward reflexive, nonobjectivist scholarship (and, not by coincidence, distancing us from historically colonialist approaches)” (2008, 183). She promotes ethnography as a process that helps solidify the scholar’s identity as much as it actually helps him or her to understand the people who are the subject of study (Kisliuk 2008, 189). Furthermore, her approach strongly situates the ethnographer into his or her own project and advocates an emphasis on experience (both of the individuals of the culture being studied as well as the experience of the one doing the study). It is this methodological framework that I wish to use within this current project: this thesis will emphasize personal experiences (both mine and those that I will re-present from my interviews) as relevant to the key issues explored within each chapter. This method will also allow me to maintain a balance between theoretical concepts and lived experience, remembering that Geertz believed lived experience is important in analysis because, “Without it, or something like it, cultural analyses seem to float several feet above their human ground” (Geertz, quoted in Olaveson 2005, 203-204). Throughout this project, I will be including several narratives of my own personal experiences as lived experience on which to ground my analysis.

Finally, I also utilize journalistic sources throughout this thesis to contextualize contemporary pop stars and songs within the current American political landscape. Furthermore,
journalistic sources allow me access to a vast number of popular music fans’ opinions regarding different songs and pop stars.

**Theories**

I utilize two main theoretical frameworks for this project: ritual theory and civil religion. Within ritual theory, Jack Santino’s article “The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque” (2011) provides the grounding for my argument of the importance of popular music for transforming, rewriting, and remapping the lives of GLBTQ individuals. Furthermore, ritual theory has been applied to GLBTQ lives previously in terms of Pride parades, coming out, and party experiences (Herdt 1992, Gorrell 2005). Within civil religion, I draw heavily from Robert Bellah’s pivotal article “Civil Religion in America” ([1967] 2005). Bellah argues that in addition to sacral religion, there is a civil religion in America. Knowing that Eaklor believes that civil religion arose in America out of a need to maintain a “virtuous citizenry” (2008, 20) and was deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian mores, I argue that understanding civil religion can provide insight into the relationship between religion, politics, and GLBTQ life in America. Furthermore, civil religion relies upon ritualesque moments in order to reify itself in American society, and ritualesque transformations rely on civil as well as secular religious symbols.

In “The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque” (2011), Jack Santino coins the term *ritualesque* as a complementary term to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *carnivalesque* ([1965] 1984)—a term that refers to festive activities that are similar to but not actually carnival activities (Santino 2011, 62). Santino argues that whereas the carnivalesque refers to what we see, “in the festivity… the ritualesque lies in the performative use of symbols—images, music, movement—to effect social change” (2011, 62). He continues to explore the way that the carnivalesque and
the ritualesque often rely upon one another in order to be truly effective, and urges scholars to not simply dismiss activities as merely play but as also involving a level of serious intent for social change. Santino summarizes this argument:

The ritualesque and the carnivalesque are not mutually exclusive, nor does the ritualesque exist in opposition to the carnivalesque. In fact, the carnivalesque is often its tool. Very often, festivity, celebration, and the carnivalesque are the modality of the ritualesque: they are the way norms are questioned and alternatives suggested. (2011, 67)

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which the ritualesque is present within the carnivalesque in my three case studies, Chicago Gay Pride Parades, pop music gay anthems, and Lady Gaga’s music and concerts, to shed light on the serious work of these events. Furthermore, this theoretical framework allows me the means to examine how these events and popular music hold much more significance for those attending them than social scientists have acknowledged.

Building on the importance of ritual and ritualesque moments in the United States, Robert Bellah argues for an understanding of the presence of civil religion in the United States in his pivotal article “Civil Religion in America” ([1967] 2005). Bellah defines civil religion as “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” ([1967] 2005, 42) that are shared and play a large role in shaping American thought, and that “this religious dimension—has its own seriousness and integrality and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does” ([1967] 2005, 40). He explores both the importance of religious thought in the creation of an American identity and the manner in which Americans have seen themselves as a religiously special people. The importance of religious thought to an American identity is made explicit in President
Eisenhower’s quote “[o]ur government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is” (Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in Herberg 1955, 97, quoted in Bellah [1967] 2005, 42), and American’s view of themselves as a religiously special people in seen in political rhetoric that marks the United States as the new Israel or the chosen land ([1967] 2005, 45). The role of religion in American identity and politics as shown in the study of civil religion makes understanding the relationship between religion and GLBTQ individuals important for two reasons: first, it contextualizes the way some form of religious belief or belief in a power greater than oneself and that one has a covenant with that power ensuring His endorsement is deeply intertwined with concepts of Americanness, and second, it reveals how the perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ people can be strategically used to mark GLBTQ individuals as un-American by political opponents of GLBTQ rights. I also will examine the intersection of religion and GLBTQ identity as a political strategy.

**Situating Myself**

I am situated in an unusual position within this project: I am both an insider and an outsider. This kind of status has been of increasing relevance in ethnomusicology since at least the time of Mellonee Burnim’s article “Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer” (1985), where Burnim details her experience of conducting fieldwork within gospel music, a culture in which she has some insider status. Her article details the ways that she is both an insider as well as an outsider in her fieldwork process. In a similar way, I am an insider in my own study because I am in fact a spiritually-minded gay man; I am an outsider in the respect that no one is ever really able to actually experience and truly speak as an insider to someone else’s experiences. And considering that the GLBTQ community is rather diverse, my experience as a white, gay man does not necessarily provide me any insider connection to a transgender experience or a black,
lesbian woman’s experience. Throughout this thesis, I work to keep both of these issues in mind and remind myself that even though I am an insider, I can never assume that my experience reflects anyone else’s. To support this framework, I will provide a brief background on my own personal history, and then I will explain why this history is relevant to my research.

I grew up in Homer Glen, Illinois, which is a southwest suburb of the city of Chicago, where I was born in 1986. Though I did not live in the city proper, my family thought it was important that I be exposed to the city of Chicago since it provided a large resource of cultural diversity and educational experiences. I was raised within a liberal Catholic home. Because of my immediate family’s liberal faith understanding, there was never any issue with my sexuality and my family’s religion. Furthermore, the Catholic Church that we attended never discussed the issue of homosexuality: the church was simply silent on the issue. As such, I never knew that there was a perceived conflict between GLBTQ identity and Catholicism until I went to college—which is when I came out. Even in my undergraduate years, I did not experience a great divide between religion and my own gay identity; in fact, the student Catholic Church at my college actually had a small support group for GLBTQ Catholics which gave a space and a voice to a community that can often be and feel marginalized.

Because of my own upbringing and personal experiences within a liberal Catholic family, I never felt the isolation that someone like Dan Savage did when he was growing up Catholic. Furthermore, my perspective in seeing the relationship between religion and GLBTQ identity tends to provide a counter-narrative to the discourse that Dan Savage and those like him are providing, precisely because I never had the experiences that they have had. That said, I tend to identify myself in public as spiritual rather than Catholic because I am not entirely comfortable being aligned with the Catholic Church’s official stance on GLBTQ rights in the United States
and because, like many Catholics, my actual beliefs do not match all of the dogma of the Catholic Church. I am self-revealing in this section for two reasons: first, I wish to reveal my own subjectivity within this project precisely so that my particular lens is known to my readers; second, since I am actually an insider in the group that I am studying, I will be relying on a fieldwork methodology that is highly self-reflexive and will be using my own life-experiences as points for analysis within this thesis.

**Overview of Chapters**

Chapter 2 is a case study of the Chicago Gay Pride Parade of 2011. In this chapter, I explore music’s role in the transformative power of the Pride parade and how music is strongly connected to many people’s experiences of coming out. First, I provide a brief history of the Chicago Gay Pride Parade in order to contextualize the parade as a transformative event. Then, I explore coming out and Pride parades as ritual events within GLBTQ life. Next, I examine drinking as a carnivalesque activity at Pride events that has a more serious ritualesque purpose of community cohesion. Then, I detail how music serves the role of creating the physical safe space at the Pride parade by showing how dance music has been semantically linked to safety for many GLBTQ people. Then, I will shed some light on how these events are shaped by narratives of the American Dream. Finally, I will explore how the overlap between American Dream narratives and the GLBTQ rights movement points to an emerging blurring of the perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity.

Chapter 3 is a case study of the musical “voice” of the GLBTQ community, as represented at Pride parades and personal experiences at gay dance clubs. This chapter will explore the musical voice that has come to represent GLBTQ individuals. It is, with little
exception, white, female, and straight. I argue that identifying with female singers is a strategic move by gay men. Gay men identify with women as a means to normalize their own sexuality, to create a center for a community for identity politics, and because they share some experiences of marginalization. Furthermore, gay men more often than not identify with musical voices that are based on black musical practices in order to politically align themselves with the African American civil rights movement. And since the African American civil rights movement drew heavily on religious narratives, these same types of narratives are brought into the GLBTQ rights movement.

Chapter 4 is a case study of Lady Gaga, exploring her music and the April 27, 2011 concert on her “The Monster Ball” tour in Cleveland, Ohio. This chapter examines Lady Gaga’s use of explicitly Christian-inspired language in her support of her GLBTQ fans and the political implications of this language choice. First, I explore Lady Gaga’s connection with her gay fans. Through understanding her origin narratives and her musical messages, her special connection to her gay fans reveals much not only about Gaga, but also the GLBTQ community. Next, I examine how Lady Gaga has become more than a pop star for many GLBTQ fans because of the social and political work that she has done. Then, I analyze how religious language is used against GLBTQ Americans currently, in order to provide the context for Lady Gaga’s subversion of this discourse in support of her GLBTQ fans. Finally, I will detail Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language and provide an analysis of its cultural and political significance.
CHAPTER 2.
PRIDE PARADES, COMING OUT AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

“‘Cause I gotta have faith…”
--George Michael, “Faith”

My first experience at any Pride parade was at the Chicago Gay Pride Parade in 2009. I was actually marching in the parade with a few friends of friends representing a psychology organization with which I had no personal connection. The parade started at noon, so I arrived in the city early on, taking a train from a friend’s house to the route which includes the gay neighborhood in Chicago (Boystown) and the surrounding areas. We drank before the parade—drinking always seems to be a part of GLBTQ events. Whether at gay bars, fundraisers, or even the “Out In Chicago” exhibit, drinking is a part of a gay social event. I was quickly informed that I wasn’t dressed festively enough; I had simply worn jeans and a black T-shirt, an outfit that I hoped would be slimming because physique becomes important at Pride. Soon, I was outfitted with a rainbow feather boa—something I would never have chosen to wear myself; but after all, it was Pride—and I was ready to not only attend, but be a part of my first gay Pride parade.

Once the parade started, I noticed so many things that simply didn’t exist in my ordinary life: rainbow colored flags that have come to symbolize Gay Pride were hanging all over the city of Chicago—seen both around the parade route as well as on cars and buildings around the city; men were walking around wearing surprisingly little clothing (with often a great amount of glitter); and there was so much drinking—I was even offered many shots from people who were watching the parade from the sidewalk seating of bars and restaurants.

However, the most shocking, and therefore, to me, transformative spectacle happened long after the parade. I saw many same-sex couples walking around the streets of Chicago
holding hands. This shouldn’t seem shocking, but from my viewpoint and experiences it was.

One night when I was a freshman at Michigan State University, I was walking a friend home
after we had both attended an orchestra concert. We were not romantically involved; however,
we were both dressed up because of the event we had attended. Three to four men drove up in a
pick-up truck and yelled at us, “Fucking fags. You’re gonna burn in hell!” They then threw a few
beer bottles at us before they sped off, laughing as they went. My friend was furious. I was
silent. I had no reaction. I had no voice. I couldn’t say anything. I was powerless in this
experience. Seeing the couples walking hand in hand in downtown Chicago changed me; it
rewrote what I thought was possible for gay individuals because something was happening that I
had previously thought was an impossibility. I had found my voice, and it was surrounded by a
soundscape of dance music. My perspective of what was and what could be possible for GLBTQ
individuals—and for myself—was transformed.

This chapter explores the transformational nature of Gay Pride parades through a ritual
lens and examines music’s role in making such transformations possible. Many of the discourses
that surround GLBTQ lives revolve around this idea of transformation—whether it is from
heteronormative to nonheteronormative through coming out, from feeling uncomfortable in one’s
own skin to feeling self-confident in finding a community, or from experiencing discrimination
to gaining equal rights through legal and societal changes. Whether these discourses of
transformation are accurate or not is much less important than the fact that they are powerful
motivators in the personal and communal lives of many GLBTQ individuals. Furthermore, these
narratives share a striking resemblance to another prominent one in the United States: the
American Dream. When GLBTQ Americans begin drawing on narratives that overlap with the
American Dream, they are also drawing on narratives that overlap with America’s Christian
heritage through American exceptionalism, even if this connection is not made consciously. This challenges the notion of an inherent dichotomy between the GLBTQ rights movement and religious narratives and thought.

A Brief History of the Chicago Gay Pride Parade

The Chicago Gay Pride Parade is just one of many Gay Pride parades that resulted from the famous “Stonewall Riot” of 1969, in which a group of gay men fought back against a police raid of Greenwich Village’s Stonewall Inn. This riot is often seen as a turning point in gay rights, as it marks the moment when gay men began openly fighting for their own rights, or as Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer describe in the introduction to Gay Culture in America:

In the Stonewall Riot of 1969, to vulgarize it, was consummated the anger and frustration of a small group of homosexual “queens,” who fought back against police harassment, their fight leading them from the oppressive, secretive bar to the streets.

(Herdt and Boxer 1992, 8)

The Chicago Gay Pride Parade began to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Riot, a way to continue this proverbial move from inside “the closet” to “out.” Though I am certain that there are many young GLBTQ individuals today who are completely unaware of Stonewall’s date or importance, the Parade is always held the last Sunday of June, corresponding with the original parade in 1970.

The Chicago parade is planned by a Pride Week Committee (Herrell 1992) that gathers supporters, floats, and undertakes other such activities. In addition to the parade, the most recent Pride events of June 2011 included those such as a “Gay Idol” singing competition held at Sidetracks (a local bar in Boystown), gay history speeches, and a weekend celebration leading up
into the parade, complete with outdoor drinking, drag shows, and other live musical performances. All of these indicate that Pride events have gone from direct political protest (as in the case of the Stonewall Riot and subsequent early commemoration in the Gay Pride parades) to a celebration of GLBTQ life as it exists today.

However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, it would be incorrect to dismiss the celebratory aspects of the parade as only playful, carnivalesque activities. As noted by Jack Santino in “The Canivalesque and the Ritualesque” (2011), the canivalesque is often the means of the ritualesque—thus, these carnivalesque activities provide the social space for ritualesque transformation to occur both individually for members attending the parades and for society as a whole. Santino explicitly discusses “Gay Pride Day” parades as a site for understanding carnivalesque activities providing the means of ritualesque transformation:

where the purpose and intention of the event [Gay Pride Day parade] is to accomplish far more than the temporary suspension of social norms allowed by the limited liminality…of the carnival. In addition to these things, Pride Day events are aimed at changing society itself by raising consciousness about homosexuality. (2011, 66-67)

Furthermore, Richard K. Herrell suggests that the Chicago Gay Pride Parade legitimizes “gay” identity in Chicago by being a city sanctioned parade and festival just as another other identity group already has in Chicago—revealed in the many ethnic parades in the city (1992). Among the main ritualesque transformations being sought by GLBTQ rights are societal and legal equality and acceptance, often associated with same-sex marriage laws. It is carnivalesque activities such as Gay Pride parades and pop music that are the means of effecting ritualesque, societal changes towards acceptance.
GLBTQ Rites

Coming out has become one of the key rites of passage in the American experience of becoming GLBTQ. Stories of coming out, personal discovery, and transformation predominate in much of GLBTQ media and life: Kyle Buchanan’s October 9, 2007 article “Coming out…” in The Advocate detailed four stories of coming out to celebrate National Coming Out Day (2007); television shows with GLBTQ characters tend to highlight coming out—with some examples including characters on Glee (2009), Queer as Folk (2000), and Ugly Betty (2010). Michael C. LaSala also explores the importance of coming out in the development of happy relationships in his article “Gay Male Couples: The Importance of Coming Out and Being Out to Parents” (2000). In fact, coming out has even been socially reified in the Human Rights Campaign’s National Coming Out Day in October. This day, which I view as a new holiday due to its widespread observance at many American Universities, is similar to national holidays. National Coming Out Day reifies the importance of coming out to GLBTQ life experience in a similar way that Bellah discusses national holidays reifying civil religion into the American family. For example, Thanksgiving—originally seen as “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer” (Bellah [1967] 2005, 45)—established civil religion in the context of the family. In fact, the Human Rights Campaign even uses a biblical reference in discussing National Coming Out Day on its page “The History of Coming Out,” describing its origins this way: “In the Beginning, There Was a March” (http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/the-history-of-coming-out, accessed September 17, 2012), satirically reinforcing coming out as a key moment.

Since coming out in America is similar to a rite of passage for the individual and has been reified through an annual holiday, ritual theory provides an important theoretical frame through which to understand the importance of Pride parades and coming out as key identity
moments for many GLBTQ individuals. Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* ([1909] 1960) is one of the foundational texts that explores the ritual aspect of events (Herdt 1992, Santino 2011, Turner 1969). For van Gennep, society is likened to a house, with many different areas. In his metaphor, ritual serves as the windows and doors, allowing people to move from one section to another such as people moving from one life stage to another ([1909] 1960, 26). He believed that in complex modern societies, the systemic separation of different areas of society was much less rigid than in what he deems less advanced societies and that the only major barrier left in modern society lay between the sacred and the profane ([1909] 1960, 1). While it is certainly possible that modern societies have many more layers of separation, the notion that van Gennep sees the sacred and the profane as polarized opposites is worth noting. Contemporary society has often associated the sacred with that which is acceptable and legitimate and the profane with that which is unacceptable and illegitimate. Heterosexuality is seen as acceptable, and is therefore legitimated through a legal institution of marriage that is often described as sanctified, while GLBTQ sexualities are seen as unacceptable and should not be given the same sanctified status. Therefore, Pride parades and coming out are *rites of passage* that attempt to transform from the illegitimate and unacceptable (the profane) to the legitimate and accepted (the sacred).

**Coming Out as Rite of Passage**

In the article “‘Coming Out’ as a Rite of Passage: A Chicago Study,” Gilbert Herdt offers his case study of a “Coming Out” group in Chicago named Horizons (1992, 32). Drawing on the ritual theories of van Gennep, Herdt discusses “coming out” in this group as a process in which one goes through a rite of passage to unlearn the social norms of heteronormative society, then relearns the new norms of homosexual society, and finally emerges as a gay individual—an
event that, he argues, often corresponds with the Chicago Gay Pride Parade as a symbolic graduation. His emphasis is upon the ritual process wherein one relearns the customs and behaviors for a new role in society, a concept of van Gennep’s that Herdt uses extensively (1992, 31). His argument brings up two extremely important points: first, it marks coming out as a social process through which a gay social identity is constructed; and second, it shows the connection between coming out and Gay Pride parades extremely clearly—where the parade becomes a social and public reification and celebration of the more private aspects of coming out.

One of the key insights of Herdt’s analysis is that coming out should not be understood as ahistorical and universal, but rather as a process specific to its time and social context. He marks four cohorts of individuals from historical periods who share coming out experiences in Chicago. The first were gay individuals from roughly 1900 to the 1930s, who often noticed same-sex desires but who were primarily invisible and may or may not have acted upon those desires. The second group was gay individuals from World War II until 1969 who recognized same-sex desires during the war when surrounded by many other people with similar desires and who started the “gay tavern” culture, though many remained closeted or came out late in life. The third were individuals who came out during the sexual revolution after 1969 and Stonewall and who came out en masse for many reasons, including social and political concerns, many of whom engaged in a very open sexual atmosphere. And finally, the fourth group were people who came out around 1982 and who later existed in a nation struggling with AIDS, an experience that changed many of the sexual mores of the community and emphasized community involvement (1992, 33-34).
In addition to the types of coming out that Herdt recognizes, I would argue that there is a new group emerging in the 2000s, one that has its emphasis not only on coming out as a GLBTQ individual, but also on honesty—honesty with oneself and honesty with those close to the individual. There is currently a strong public discourse that sees coming out as a way to find one’s “true or essential self” that is made explicit in the current “gay” anthem “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga or in the television portrayals of coming out (see Kurt in Glee, Michael in Queer as Folk). Within this discursive framework, to not come out is to be seen as a dishonest person, and to not tell other people is to hide portions of one’s self that are essential to one’s identity. In this manner—for the most current cohort of GLBTQ individuals—coming out is as much about including other people in one’s life as it is about personal transformation for that individual.

As a side effect of the new importance of honesty to coming out, the inclusion of family and friends into the life of GLBTQ individuals has also become associated with coming out. Michael C. LaSala also discusses the importance of coming out for the inclusion of other people into GLBTQ individuals’ lives. In his study “Gay Male Couples: The Importance of Coming Out and Being Out to Parents” (2000), he concludes that being out to parents benefits couples greatly because these couples no longer have to hide their relationships from family members, may have their relationships validated as important, and their partners included in family events—even if the parents disapprove of the relationship. Though LaSala never uses the terms “rite of passage” or “ritual” in his study, he does hint that coming out to parents is an important step in the development of a new social status and a happy, fulfilling, romantic relationship for gay men—implying that coming out might be seen as a rite of passage.

This shift in coming out discourse has also influenced the changing connection of the process to Pride events. Whereas earlier cohorts like the post-Stonewall group were extremely
aware of the connection between the Stonewall Riot and Pride parades as a way of building political awareness of the community, current descriptions of the Chicago Gay Pride Parade reveal an event that is more a celebration of gay life that all people are included in. In fact, in my three years of attending the parade, many of the people that I met at the parade were not actually GLBTQ identified, but just people who came either to support a friend or family member, or simply to have a really good time at a parade. Just as coming out has become equally focused on including those close to the individual as well as that individual’s personal transformation, the Gay Pride parades have become as much about including the general public and the city into GLBTQ cultural practices as it is for the GLBTQ individuals attending. Pride parades become the public social manifestation of coming out that has typically been more private.

Ritualesque within the Carnivalesque: Drinking at the Parade

In this section, before I discuss music’s role at the Pride parade, I briefly analyze one other key activity at the parade which represents how ritualesque transformation is embedded within carnivalesque behavior: drinking. Drinking is an important part of all of the Chicago Pride events that I have attended. Alcohol was involved in the first two Pride parades that I marched in. Drinking before (and often during) is part of the whole experience. When the parade began at noon (rather than 10 AM, as it does currently), I often saw people drinking around 10 AM as part of their preparation for the event. Halsted’s Bar and Grill is often filled with people drinking before the parade due to their extensive Bloody Mary and mojito menus, and shots were offered to me while I was marching (even when I was marching for the City of Chicago’s Board of Health). After the parade finishes, most people go out to the bars in town as well. One participant, Julie, told me why she likes Pride so much stating, “it’s so much fun. It is
one of the few times you can go out clubbing, but the sun is still out” (fieldnotes, June 26, 2011). The clear indication is that Boystown is an area of the city associated with nightlife, and that Pride is one of the few times of the year that the neighborhood and its gay culture thrive during the daylight hours rather than the evening.

Furthermore, the importance of drinking in Pride events can even be seen in musical choices. The importance of drinking to the Parade was reinforced in music at the 2011 parade when the song “Shots” performed by LMFAO and Lil Jon was played. This was one of the best received songs of the day, with many people becoming excited and singing (yelling even) along to the song while raising their glasses and pumping their arms.

I emphasize the importance of drinking, however, not simply to show that it is prevalent at Pride events. Rather, the way drinking occurs at these events actually serves a community building purpose very similar to those described in many ritual eating and drinking ceremonies. In van Gennep’s own studies on rituals, he states of:

The rite of eating and drinking together, which will be frequently mentioned in this book, is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union, and has been called a sacrament of communion. A union by this means may be permanent, but more often it lasts only during the period of digestion. ([1909] 1960, 29)

In this way, drinking becomes a means of creating a physical community, and the creation of a physical manifestation of the GLBTQ community is one of the main objectives of the parade.

Drinking as a ritual of community cohesion at GLBTQ events in America is unsurprising given that drinking—especially heavy or binge drinking—plays a formative role in other transformative periods in American youth society such as in the college years. In a study about
the role of binge drinking as a perceived rite of passage in college experiences by Lizabeth A. Crawford and Katherine B. Nowak (2006), binge drinking was often identified as an integral part of the collegiate experience by students who drank heavily. Furthermore, many of these same students viewed college as a liminal time of transition between childhood and adulthood when the risky behaviors associated with binge drinking were deemed acceptable (2006, 195). Crawford and Nowak draw on a ritual model from T. Driver’s book *The Magic of Ritual* (1991) in which rituals serve to “provide people with a sense of belonging, predictability, and emotional well-being” (Crawford and Nowak 2006, 194).

Considering that drinking is associated with other transitional, liminal periods of identity formation in America, I believe GLBTQ individuals are not simply drinking in excess during the Gay Pride parade. Rather, GLBTQ individuals are drinking in a Santino style ritualesque way that allows for the incorporation of all people into a community in order to create a safe-space for the types of personal transformation that I spoke of in the opening stories. The emphasis on inclusion into a community—though it may be temporary—can even be seen in the music that is used to emphasize drinking, songs such as “Shots” and other songs that have a widespread popularity beyond that of the GLBTQ community (much of the music played at the parade were top 40 hits on the radio), implying that all who attend are part of this community. In the same way that drinking is one carnivaleque activity that becomes the means for ritualesque community building, music also serves an important transformative function at the Pride parade.

**Music’s Role at the Chicago Gay Pride Parade**

Just as I have provided a perspective that shows how drinking has a ritualesque purpose hidden within its carnivalesque surface level interpretation, in this section I explore music’s role
in the creation of the safe-space that the Chicago Gay Pride Parade offers. Though music might seem to have a less direct connection to the parade’s ability to engender personal transformation, I suggest that it is one of the key sites for the creation of that safe-space. Drawing on the concepts of Jonathan Sterne (1997), I argue that music provides a moving sonic architecture that marks the physical space of the parade route as “gay-friendly.” This sonic “safe-space” is created by playing music that has become associated with the GLBTQ community—such as dance music—through a semiotic process Thomas Turino calls “sonic snowballing” (2008, 9). In this way music sonically remaps a physical location as a gay friendly-area, creating the safe-space necessary for the parade.

**Overview of the Music at the Parade**

Music at the Pride parade is heard mostly from floats as they travel down the parade route and from local bars that have music playing from their speakers. During the 2011 Chicago Pride Parade, many of the floats played music from speakers, using prerecorded music as the primary source. Sometimes this music was controlled by a visible DJ while other times the one making the musical choices was not seen. In some cases, there were live musicians: one float had a small rock band playing a live cover of George Michael’s “Faith”—which was received very well by the crowd as a whole; the Buddhist temple’s float had drummers performing Taiko style drumming on practice tires (in order to preserve the actual taiko drums, it is common to practice or perform on tires that have been wrapped in tape for situations that would be dangerous to the drums).

Most of the music heard at the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade included the popular songs that were currently on the radio, emphasizing female artists such as Katy Perry, Lady
Some of the most popular songs—or at least songs heard with the greatest frequency—were “Born This Way,” “Poker Face,” and “Boys Boys Boys” by Lady Gaga, “Firework” by Katy Perry, “Raise Your Glass” by P!nk, and “Till The World Ends” by Britney Spears.

Most of these songs were dance songs—or at least songs that can be danced to. The connection between gay men and dance music is well documented (Bollen 2001, Buckland 2002, Cooper 1993, Dyer 1995, Fikentscher 2000, Hughes 1994, Siegel 2001, Thomas 1995). In fact, Paul Siegel even discusses the legal precedent of dance, as seen as a legitimate form of free speech for GLBTQ individuals in the United States, in his article “A Right to Boogie Queerly” (2001). This connection is not at all surprising because dance music involves the body—the primary site and means through which GLBTQ individuals are made different (Butler 1990, 1993): GLBTQ individuals are seen as different from others because of the way that they relate to their own bodies and how they relate their bodies to those of other people. If the reason GLBTQ people have faced oppression is because of the way they relate their bodies to others, then it follows that dance music and dancing provides a sense of freedom for many GLBTQ individuals because it allows them to have control over how they use their bodies to relate to others.

**Dance Music’s Role in Gay Communities**

As I have stated, dance music has been intimately connected to the experiences of many gay men historically and currently. When I interviewed local Chicagoan and parade attendee Jonas Grey, he marked dance and music as extremely important factors in his own coming out and finding himself as a gay man. On the importance of music, he stated, “music is the
soundtrack to my life,” and, “music is liberating.” He marked his going to college as a time when he was able to start exploring and experimenting with new music after growing up in a more conservative, southern area. In college, he started going to clubs, particularly the club Platos. He was drawn to the clubs particularly for the dancing (as well as the many music videos, as he was in college during the 80s when videos became an important part of popular music). Dancing became of place of liberation and freedom for him. He was very drawn to David Bowie, and particularly to REM. For dancing, Madonna’s music was often a part of these club scenes. Dancing to these songs in those clubs provided Grey with a space where he could be free with himself (Interview, June 19, 2012).

Dance clubs also played a strong role in my own coming out experience. I was also in college (attending Michigan State University) at the time. Spin was the local gay bar of choice for many, and I often attended this bar along with several new gay friends I made after coming out. Previous to being out, I was never particularly drawn to the current style of dancing common to most people my age (grinding, where one rhythmically rubs against another); though I did enjoy dance forms like salsa and swing. Attending Spin changed my perceptions of dance, however. Though I was not involved with any of the friends I went to the club with, I experienced a personal sense of liberation in being able to dance in any way that I wished with other men without fear of rejection or isolation. I found my own personal safe-space in Spin, and there the soundtrack to my liberation was dance music performed mostly by female diva artists.

Grey’s and my experiences are by no means anomalies. In You Better Work, Kai Fikentscher discusses how the underground dance club scene in New York City became a safe-space for many gay men, particularly gay men of color (2000). He explores how the music and
dance styles become the means through which these gay men were able to create their own space, their own identity. The use of music to mark a space belonging to a particular group of people does not only happen in the gay community, though. In her study of clubs in the United Kingdom, *Club Cultures*, Sarah Thornton argues that music is used to designate specific clubs as belonging to particular youth groups because few things separate so clearly along generational and style lines as music does (1996).

In his book *Music as Social Life* (2008), Thomas Turino builds upon the theory of semiotics forwarded by American theoretician Charles Sanders Peirce (2008, 5). An index is when a sign and an object are experienced together—this case, dance music is the sign that is experienced along with the object of a safe-space. Turino further explains that one sign can end up gathering many meanings by being indexed along with several objects at once in a process that he refers to as semantic snowballing (2008, 9). Since dance music is often a part of these safe-spaces generated in clubs, it has gone through the process of indexing and semantic snowballing for many gay men (and many other GLBTQ individuals). A simple example of this semantic snowballing can be seen in the song “So What” performed by P!nk. I first heard this song lip-synced by a drag queen in a gay bar in Lansing, Michigan. Because of this experience, I will always think not only of that drag performer and the freedom I felt having my own gay bar to attend, but also of the people who attended with me that day (a friend who was straight and was seeing the fun side of gay culture, which he never knew existed). As such, for me this song represents sharing gay culture even though these meanings may never have been intended for the original sign.¹

¹ The connection between dance music and safe-space is so strong for many gay men that music may be used to sonically mark a space as safe even when it is not necessarily sounding
In his article “Sounds Like the Mall of America,” Jonathan Sterne explores how “music is central—an architectural—part of malls and other semi-public commercial spaces” (Sterne 1997, 23). Sterne argues that music is central to the architectural way of identifying Minnesota’s Mall of America as a social space of consumerism and that the music is used to sonically mark the different sections of the mall—such as entertainment, dining, and shopping. Drawing on his arguments that music can be used as part of the architecture of a building—a sonic architecture, as Sterne implies—I argue that music can be and is used to form a type of sonic architecture at the Pride Parade in order to physically create the safe-space that is needed for ritualesque transformation to occur. Using dance music that would commonly be heard at a contemporary gay bar, the parade sonically marks the physical space, claiming the city streets for the GLBTQ community, if even for a day. Furthermore, this physical space claimed by sonic architecture is no longer a set, confined physical space, such as a bar, but a moving, free architecture within the larger structure of the city. In this way the parade is remapping the physical space of Chicago to expand and include new areas as being GLBTQ friendly. And the remapping for inclusion and within a typically gay club. In my research of Gay Night at the club Uptown in Bowling Green, Ohio, I have found that music is one of the key means through which the usually straight club is temporarily transformed into a gay space. The DJ at the club (field notes, March 14, 2011) pointedly informed me that he will take any requests for music except for hip-hop and rap, because that is the music performed every other night at every club and he wanted to offer something different for Gay Night. In other words, in the DJ’s mind rap/hip-hop and gay spaces cannot mix. This is an interesting notion considering the historical connections between “gay” music and “black” music through electronic dance music (Fikentscher 2000; Thomas 1995); however, it is not without precedence. The August 18, 2012 article “For hip-hop and gay rights, a transformative moment” by Scott Gold in the Los Angeles Times discusses how hip-hop has historically been considered a homophobic music culture that is currently becoming more open. Evidence of these changes are most prominent in the coming out of artists like Frank Ocean—who consequently released the song “Bad Religion,” about an unrequited love affair with a man from his youth. Whether hip-hop is or is not safe music for GLBTQ spaces is clearly a concept that is changing, it is still clear that music helps create safe spaces in GLBTQ clubs such as Gay Night in Bowling Green, Ohio.
belonging connects to larger narratives of inclusion and belonging within the GLBTQ rights movement in America.

**Narratives of Inclusion and Belonging**

In this section, I reveal how Gay Pride parades serve as a physical manifestation of some of the overarching aims of the GLBTQ rights movement, focusing on issues of inclusion into mainstream legal institutions as well as finding a sense of belonging in the United States. The parade allows GLBTQ Americans to remap the physical spaces of cities to include themselves much as they are reworking narratives of Americanness (like the American Dream) to also include them. The concept of belonging for GLBTQ individuals is also prevalent in other nations. In his book *The Gay Archipelago* (2005), Tom Boellstorff discusses the connection between nationality and sexuality in Indonesia, and how this intersection relates to the idea of belonging, which is central for many gay and lesbi there. Boellstorff argues that the concept of belonging for gay and lesbi individuals draws strongly on nationalist discourses. Gay and lesbi Indonesians use nationalist discourses to provide themselves the space for a sense of belonging within their nation because a gay and lesbi identity is not part of the local traditions that constitute Indonesia’s multicultural society. In a similar way, American GLBTQ individuals draw on national discourses to create their own sense of belonging and inclusion into American culture.

Same-sex marriage has become the most public issue for the current American GLBTQ rights movement and is seen as a national issue due to federal laws concerning marriage (Adam 2003). This was abundantly apparent at the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade, which included a celebration for the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in New York State. Many people
marched with signs supporting New York while simultaneously asking for the same type of law to be passed in Illinois (as of 2012, Illinois does have laws allowing for civil unions for same-sex couples, but no marriage laws). The reason same-sex marriage has become the undisputed focus of the GLBTQ rights movement is of great importance here. The right to marry has become a symbol of inclusion into and acceptance by mainstream American society—highlighting the GLBTQ rights movement’s goals. The positioning of the right to marry as a symbol of inclusion has precedence within the civil rights movement’s fight for interracial marriage—evidence that GLBTQ activism draws strongly on civil rights as a model.

GLBTQ rights movement uses the African American civil rights movement in the 1950s as a model for its own rights movement and modes of activism (Eaklor 2008). Amongst the similarities, both movements drew upon a model of reform that is similar to the model used by evangelical preachers who wish to both change the mind and spirit concerning an issue—it is not enough to convince someone that the reform is needed; rather, people must be convinced to feel that the change is right and just (Eaklor 2008, 21). Much as the African American civil rights movement drew upon dreams of an equal America, GLBTQ rights would argue that equality for themselves is what the American Dream should offer.

In her book *Idolized*, ethnomusicologist Katherine Meizel explores the many differing narratives that constitute American Dream as they relate to and are constructed in the television show *American Idol* (2011). In her discussion of the show’s self-conscious aspirations to capitalize on the American Dream, Meizel provides a working definition:

The American Dream is a mythology not defined by a single narrative but by a collection of overlapping stories tracing some transformation of identity…whether they
[the dreams] are about fame or fortune (or both at once), or plainer goals such as education or home ownership, they are all dreams of moving up, moving on. (2011, 82)

Within this discussion of the American Dream she also marks several situations that are most ripe for expressing the American Dream, one of which is how “immigrants are made into Americans” (2011, 82). There are two key points of the American Dream (particularly the American Dream as it relates to immigrants) that have also become key points of the narratives of GLBTQ rights in America: first, there is an inherent belief in progress—or as Meizel stated, “of moving up, moving on” that has become all but solidified in the teen suicide prevention program It Gets Better—which could easily be read not only as a message to individual GLBTQ youth, but also as a collective message to the GLBTQ community in the belief that progress is coming. And second, just as an immigrant becomes an American through assimilation and a transformation of ethnic identity, there is a notion that GLBTQ Americans are not truly full citizens until equal rights such as same-sex marriage laws provide a more complete, legal citizenship.

Meizel further elaborates on the process of becoming American in her article “A Singing Citizenry” (2006). In addition to the legal actions needed for an immigrant to be considered an American, there is a socialization process that involves enculturation into American civil religion. She discusses how the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration government website reified an American way of life by having the new citizens watch the President’s welcome in a video of ‘God Bless the USA’ (www.uscis.gov, revised 1 November 2004, in Meizel 2006). In this way music becomes a means of engendering inclusion into America by fostering an American civil religious identity within the citizens.
Much as the GLBTQ rights movement has similarly drawn on American Dream narratives for GLBTQ individuals—the strong belief in progress and the hope to one day be seen as equal (legal) citizens—Pride parades become a social space where these dreams and aspirations are reaffirmed on a public level. It is Pride parades that allow the space for ritualesque transformation both of individuals and society as a whole; and it is within Pride Parades that the process of inclusion happens, both of GLBTQ individuals into typically heteronormative spaces and of Chicago citizens into GLBTQ worlds. Furthermore, the parade serves as a literal remapping of physical space to include GLBTQ individuals and thus includes them within the larger structure of Chicago.

The American Dream, “Firework” and “Faith”

Since music can be used as a means of enculturation as seen in the article “A Singing Citizenry” by Meizel (2006), in this section I briefly examine two songs at the Pride parade to analyze their implications in reifying or challenging the dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity. As I stated earlier in this chapter, the song “Faith” by George Michael was one of the crowd favorites during the 2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade. The song narrates the story between two lovers in which one is holding out for a “truer” love, reminding himself that, “I gotta have faith.” The reaction to this song at the Pride Parade has brought up many questions for me: Is this song so well loved because George Michael is an openly gay man? Do people listen to the lyrics (I certainly only knew the chorus before writing this chapter) or do they simply hear what they wish to hear in the song? How is the concept of faith being understood when the song is played to gay men, many of whom have been judged by some religious individuals in this country? And finally, what does it mean to have faith as a gay man in America? I have found no solid answers to all of these questions; however, when I discussed these issues informally with
many people I know in the GLBTQ community, there is certainly one thing the community as a whole seems to put its faith into: the idea of progress.

“Firework,” recorded by Katy Perry was also one of the best received songs in the Pride parade, having one of the most enthusiastic crowd reactions as the song was played from a bus that used a glitter bomb in the middle of the parade. Released as part of Perry’s *Teenage Dream* album in August of 2010 and composed by Ester Dean, Katy Perry, Mikkel Storleer Eriksen, Sandy Wilhelm, and Tor Erik Hermansen, this song’s connection to the gay community is only made explicit through extramusical means, as GLBTQ identity is never once mentioned in the song; however, the music video portrays two young gay men kissing. This song has been clearly taken on by the GLBTQ—particularly the gay male—community as a song that represents some part of that identity.

The overarching narrative of Katy Perry’s “Firework” is that of self-worth and exceptionalism. The lyrics begin by addressing an unnamed individual (who can really be anyone listening to the song) and follow a pattern of statements and questions about doubt and feelings of self-worth such as, “Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin, like a house of cards, one blow from caving in?” (2011) and “You don’t have to feel like a waste of space, you’re original, cannot be replaced” (2011), which are met with affirmations of self-worth in the chorus:

You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine
Just own the night like the 4\textsuperscript{th} of July
‘Cause baby you’re a firework
Come on, show ‘em what you’re worth
Make ‘em go, oh oh oh
As you shoot across the sky (2011)
This juxtaposition of feelings of shame and low self-worth with continued affirmations of self-worth and importance from Perry to the listener is exactly what makes this song so powerful for many GLBTQ youth. Many GLBTQ youth in America are currently dealing with personal and societal bullying that diminishes their own self-image as evidenced by the high rate of GLBTQ youth suicide—an issue that is gaining more media coverage since 2010. Perry’s song addresses these feelings of inadequacy by providing a pointed, directed message of self-worth: “‘Cause baby you’re a firework” (2011), using language that not only promotes personal self-worth, but also promotes the individual as exceptional.

“Firework” is particularly interesting because it uses the same types of metaphors used in the gospel song, “This Little Light of Mine” by Harry Dixon Loes. Both songs use light as symbolic of an individual’s self-worth and express the concern that this inner light must be expressed in order for that individual to be a full, happy person; both songs draw heavily on the notion of individualism that is an important feature of American Dream narratives; and both songs use the same juxtaposition of moments of doubt and weakness compared to the chorus with its reminder of self-worth. The connections between the songs are unsurprising as Katy Perry—the singer of “Firework”—originally recorded as a Christian gospel singer under the alias Katy Hudson. However, whereas “Firework” makes its message known through a more secularly based language, “This Little Light of Mine” is more overt in its use religious imagery. Even so, I maintain that “Firework” draws strongly on the same narrative and even uses several clichés that are often connected to religious ideals in America, such as the line “Maybe your reason why all the doors are closed so you could open one that leads you to the perfect road” is quite similar to the common clichés of “When God closes a door, he opens a window.”
The blurring of sacred and secular narratives as seen in the two songs of “Firework” and “This Little Light of Mine” also occurs in American exceptionalism. William T. Cavanaugh outlines two differing yet blurred forms of American exceptionalism (2005): first, there is an American exceptionalism that is based upon a sacred understanding of the United States as a new Israel—due to the Puritans voyage from Europe to America—or as famously declared by John Winthrop, a “‘city upon a hill’ (from Matthew 5:14)” (2005, 263). This American exceptionalism both positioned America as a shining example to all other nations in its relation with God; however, it also reminded America to be wary of the problems of falling from good graces due to its heightened position. And second, there is an American exceptionalism that is based upon secular, Enlightenment notions of America as the shining example of a country promoting values of freedom and right (2005, 265). This exceptionalism points to many of the reform movements in America—including GLBTQ rights—where freedom and individual rights are seen as inherent aspects of America and the dream of what this nation represents.

In this way American GLBTQ individuals must be understood as being both GLBTQ and American. Being American, they were raised in a society that taught intense exceptionalism, individualism, and an inherent belief in upward mobility and progress—all traits that are involved in the GLBTQ rights movement. However, these beliefs already overlap with American understandings of religion through the blurrings of a sacred and a secular exceptionalism which become key in understanding what it means to be an American. Since GLBTQ citizens are drawing on American Dream narratives in their own rights movement, then they are also drawing on narratives connected to America’s Christian heritage, thus challenging the perceived polarization of religion and GLBTQ rights.
Conclusions

Pride parades become an important physical and social space to allow for ritualesque transformations for many GLBTQ individuals precisely because Pride Parades actually temporarily rewrite social spaces from heteronormative to GLBTQ safe-spaces. It is this kind of safe-space that allows for the types of both personal and social transformations that I mention at the beginning of this chapter—such as my own personal transformation in relearning that it would be possible for someone like me to hold the hand of someone I cared about in public. Furthermore, these types of transformations that can be seen at Pride Parades actually mirror the work of ritual theorists—such as van Gennep—who emphasize the ways that ritual transformations are part of a relearning process through which a stranger may be included into a larger group.

As I have demonstrated, the emphasis on inclusion is of particular importance in understanding the current GLBTQ rights movement in the United States because the movement is so focused on legal inclusion and acceptance into mainstream American social norms. Building on Herdt’s theory of coming out as being defined by historical context, I have shown that this emphasis on inclusion has even affected what it means to come out, influencing the current dual focus on both the GLBTQ community and including non-GLBTQ family and friends into one’s life. Furthermore, as I have discussed, the narratives of inclusion that underpin the whole of the GLBTQ rights movement currently are quite similar to narratives of the American Dream, particularly the American Dream story acted out by immigrants for generations. Pride parades serve the purpose of providing a physical manifestation of inclusion that the GLBTQ rights movement is searching for in less tangible ways.
Furthermore, music plays a central role in Pride parade’s ability to create the safe-space that allows for the co-opting of typically heteronormative spaces into temporarily GLBTQ spaces. By drawing on music that has been semiotically linked to GLBTQ individuals’ own safe-spaces (mostly music played at bars and clubs where many GLBTQ people first experience a GLBTQ social space), the music at these events creates a sonic architecture temporarily marking the space as also safe. Music creating this safe-space is what actually allows parades the social and physical space to make possible the ritualesque transformations necessary for personal and societal change.

Finally, I show that the American Dream narrative that underpins the GLBTQ rights movement at the beginning of the 21st century actually also overlaps with another narrative, that of American exceptionalism. By showing how all of these narratives intersect and interact, the dichotomy between religious and GLBTQ life that is constantly being reified in this country can be challenged. Though the emphasis is very different from the faith of the Christian right’s faith, the GLBTQ rights movement is also based on a faith, a faith that things will get better and progress toward acceptance will be made, even in the face of continued discrimination, high youth suicide rates, and continued hate crimes.
CHAPTER 3.
THE VOICE: STRATEGIC IDENTIFICATION

“Shout Hallelujah
Come on get happy”
--Judy Garland, “Get Happy”

On March 29, 2011, I attended a drag show at the Bowling Green, Ohio club Uptown. Even though there is no real “gay bar” in Bowling Green—surprising, considering it is a college town—Tuesday at Uptown is “Gay Night.” It was relatively late, somewhere around midnight, as these events never really get going until at least 11:45 PM (for some reason, Bowling Green’s GLBTQ community rarely goes out early). This evening, one performance really struck me: drag queen Justyce Sinclair performed Katy Perry’s song “Firework.” During the performance, Justyce was much more emotional than usual—rather than dancing energetically, she sang (lip synced) with most of the emphasis on her facial expressions and dramatic arm movements. The audience could feel this energy as well. While often people stand loosely around the stage, many had pushed up to be directly next to the stage. Looking around, I noticed that many of the audience members (particularly the younger members) were lip syncing or singing along with Justyce. While the music was far too loud for anyone to really be able to converse in the club, Katy Perry’s voice became the voice of these audience members; both of the drag queen and the audience members who were embodying her voice through the process of lip syncing.

This chapter examines the phenomenon revealed in the above story: that the metaphorical musical “voice” of the GLBTQ community is not—and mostly has not been—produced by the actual bodies of GLBTQ individuals. Rather, the musical voice of this community has most often been provided by and co-opted from female artists such as Lady Gaga, P!nk, Ke$ha, Katy Perry, Judy Garland, Diana Ross, many disco singers, opera singers, Cher, Barbra Streisand, and
other artists—most of whom are straight and not necessarily insiders within the community. Considering that much scholarship on the voice, following Roland Barthes’s article, “The Grain of the Voice” (1977), has focused on how the voice is an embodied instrument, the fact that GLBTQ individuals do not use their own voices can be seen to reveal a key issue in American society: these individuals have been unable to express their own desires with their own voices (and thus, their own bodies) in historical and contemporary America. While there may be certain issues and problems associated with this, I explore the strategic benefits that using another person’s voice as a locus for identity has in the GLBTQ community. Gay men strategically identify with the voices of women (1) to normalize their own sexuality by placing their desire of a male body into a preexisting, accepted context, (2) to create a center for communal identity politics, and (3) because they feel they have experiences of similar marginalization to the women they identify with. Furthermore, within popular music, the voices that are most often identified with are black musical voices—or at least voices that are influenced by them. Identification with black female voices is even more strategic because it solidifies the relationship discursively made between the GLBTQ communities fight for equal rights and African-American’s civil rights movement, a movement that drew heavily on religious narratives.

**Strategic Identification**

Drawing on the concept of strategic essentialism from the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Landry and MacLean 1996), I argue that the use of a voice that is not the embodied voice of a particular community can have strategic, political purposes. When I discuss strategic identification in this paper, I am referring to the ways that the GLBTQ community strategically chooses particular voices to musically represent their own community. What voices and what is represented within this strategic identification can differ depending on time period and social as
well as historical context; however, all voices chosen to represent the GLBTQ community can offer insights into the aims, goals, and motivations of the community. I begin this investigation with the contemporary anthems.

**Contemporary Gay Anthems**

Contemporary gay anthems, most notably Ke$ha’s “We R Who We R,” P!nk’s “Raise Your Glass,” Katy Perry’s “Firework,” and Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” also provide insights into the current GLBTQ rights movement’s aims and goals. These songs draw on a familiar narrative, based in the American Dream, that emphasizes individualism, exceptionalism, and personal self-worth and self-love. However, these songs have become important within the GLBTQ community for the ways that they have been understood by members of the community as reflecting their own experiences or because the songs’ authors wrote them in response to a slew of gay youth suicides that took place in the Fall of 2012. In this way these songs further reflect that connection between GLBTQ rights and American Dream narratives explored in chapter 2.

Through examining these songs as a collective, there are two key features the narratives reveal: first, the songs connect with the GLBTQ community because they emphasize self-worth, and second, the songs normalize GLBTQ identity within a larger framework of marginalization since none of the songs except “Born This Way” explicitly state anything to do with GLBTQ identity. This attempt to group GLBTQ identity with any other way that youth can feel insecure or marginalized is the means through which GLBTQ identity becomes normalized. In other words, by not explicitly mentioning GLBTQ identity within a song and instead focusing on personal self-worth, this identity is being assimilated into a mainstream American consciousness.
on some level. Perhaps the connection of these songs to the GLBTQ community also indicates that this community is interested in being mainstream, or at least those members for whom these songs are meaningful.

The rise of gay anthems written around 2010 is not without immediate historical precedent. The song “Beautiful” performed by Christina Aguilera serves as the primary model for many of the later songs that have been adopted as gay anthems. Aguilera’s song and music video are addressed to individuals who do not recognize their own self-worth because they may not fit into the current normative conceptions of beauty. The main message of the song can easily be summed up in the chorus, “You’re beautiful no matter what they say; words can’t bring you down,” reminding people to respect their own self-worth even if it does not match societal ideals of what should be deemed worthy. The song is performed in a style that is influenced by blues and gospel singing, a genre most associated with black singers.

Furthermore, in the music video, Aguilera makes clear the types of people she is speaking to: a boy who wishes he wasn’t so skinny, an anorexic girl, a man dressing in drag, a girl being bullied, a punk being ignored on the bus, a gay male couple kissing in public, and Aguilera herself—alone in a boarded up room. The rhetoric of the song is designed to be particularly emotionally powerful. The beginning is in the first person, “I am beautiful”; the middle moves into a direct line of, “You’re beautiful”; and finally as the song ends, the notion is “We are beautiful,” including everyone into the reclamation of self-worth, which is marked both visually in the music video and sonically in the song. While the lyrics switch from “you” to “we,” Aguilera sings with a more belting style while adding more melismas into the music itself, raising the intensity—and the melismas also serve to strengthen the connection to a blues style;
at the same time, the music video shows image after image of the characters smiling, in close-up, implying that they have found their own beauty.

Alex Hawgood marks “Beautiful” as a gay anthem in the *New York Times* (2010), and I believe its status as a gay anthem is only partly due to the gay couple kissing in the music video. The song speaks to the experience of being left out of society and being devalued that had become a large part of the life experiences of many GLBTQ individuals. And while the current gay anthems do have much in common with “Beautiful”—particularly its emphasis on personal worth and hidden beauty—they tend to focus on a celebration of diversity and overcoming adversity rather than the difficult experiences themselves. In other words, the current gay anthems are happier.

The emphasis on celebration in the current gay anthems can be seen as a marker of the rising hope emanating from the GLBTQ rights movement; however, this hope is tinged with difficulties. While more states are legalizing same-sex marriages (which can be pointed to as growing acceptance of same-sex relationships), there has also been a string of youth suicides that led sex-advice columnist Dan Savage to start the “It Gets Better” campaign—a YouTube video campaign urging GLBTQ youth to not commit suicide by explaining how life can improve dramatically upon leaving high school. Many of the current gay anthems are connected in some way to “It Gets Better,” either they are dedicated to the program or are used in one of the YouTube videos as part of the campaign, linking these songs to a message of hope. Alex Hawgood of the *New York Times* comments of these new gay anthems:

Together, these artists represent a new wave of young (and mostly straight) women who are providing the soundtrack for a generation of gay fans coming to terms with their
identity in a time of turbulent and confusing cultural messages. “These songs are counteracting a hateful message that a peer, family member, politician or a bully might be saying,” said Dan Savage, the sex columnist who started the “It Gets Better” campaign, for which Ke$ha has also recorded a video. “I get frustrated with gay politicos who discount or undermine the importance of pop stars,” Mr. Savage added. “They’re a huge part of this fight.” (2010)

While the current gay anthems do provide some insight into the narratives underlying the GLBTQ rights movement, I believe the vocalist and the vocal styles being identified with through strategic identification can provide more information than what narratives speak to GLBTQ individuals. I also suggest that GLBTQ individuals identify with the social “grain” of the voices that are taken as gay anthems.

**Voice as an Embodied Instrument**

This section explores the concept of a social body and how a particular musical style can be engrained onto it. While most of the current gay anthems are by white singers (Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, P!nk, and Ke$ha), I suggest that these singers have different musical styles and voices engrained onto their *social bodies*—musical styles that, within popular music, are often associated with black musical voices. By examining the social bodies and what historical figures affect contemporary pop singers, I am able to better reveal what gay men are identifying with in these singers.

Much scholarship on the voice since Roland Barthes’s famous article “The Grain of the Voice” (1977) has focused on how the voice is an embodied instrument (Frith 1996, Jarmen-Ivens 2006, Brooks 2010, Eidsheim 2009). Drawing on the ideas of feminist theorist Julia
Kristeva, Barthes argues for understanding the voice as existing within two different realms: the phenosong and the genosong. The phenosong is the aspect of voice that derives its meaning from language and structure, or as Barthes comments:

The *pheno-song* (if the transposition be allowed) covers all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer's idiolect, the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression. (Barthes 1978, 182)

The genosong, on the other hand, is all of the meaning that does not come from language, but rather from the meaning of the body itself. Barthes describes the genosong as:

the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality’…where the melody really works at the language—not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters—where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. (Barthes 1978, 182)

It is within this space of the genosong that Barthes finds what he refers to as the “grain” of the voice, which in the simplest terms is, “the body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 1978, 188).

For Barthes, making a separation between the structural sphere of language with a direct meaning and the unknowable realm of the body is of the utmost importance. He is drawn to this notion of a grain in the voice, and wishes to hear the sounds of the body as it sings, denigrating the formal, classical training style with its emphasis on the breath (1978). Interestingly, he
marks the notion of meaning beyond language as connected to the notion of the body, and in this way, he connects all extra-structural meaning of song to the body from which it comes.

However, recently scholars have begun to question this inherent connection between non-language-based meaning and the body by exploring the many ways that society and culture also affect what is embodied within a vocal style. Ethnomusicologists Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels argue in their essay in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* that though the body does express itself in the voice, it is always a social body, one that has been affected by the community and culture within which one lives (2004). So in this way, the “grain” of the voice has much more than just the materiality of the body, but also the social component of this body in it as well.

Musicologist Nina Eidsheim further complicates a dichotomy between body and social conditioning by exploring this notion of a social body in her article, “Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre” (2009). As her work can show, perhaps social conditioning can actually be engrained into a social body. In this article, Eidsheim problematizes the connection between the body and vocal timbre by examining the synthesized vocal program Vocaloid. She explains that when the designers of Vocaloid worked to create their synthetic “Soul” voice of vocal character Lola, the producers chose a woman who grew up in the Caribbean and was a soul singer. Lola was received critically by many users of this product for having a Caribbean accent due to the performer’s natural accent being apparent when she sang monosyllables (Eidsheim 2009). Eidsheim explains that this experience points to the fallacy that a particular body would automatically have a particular timbre engrained within it—in this case; she specifically points out that any black woman will not automatically have the grain of a black soul singer. A similar connection between a specific body type and a certain
vocal timbre exists in regards to divas. And the connection between a diva and a vocal timbre is problematic as well because though the voice originates from a particular body, that very vocal timbre is often recreated through many impersonators of the more famous divas.

However, Eidsheim does explain that just because a vocal timbre is not inherently connected to a material body, a vocal timbre can become engrained upon a social body. She suggests that there is a process through which a particular vocal timbre becomes associated with a racialized body (as in soul style and black bodies) because the racialized body is expected to sound like the vocal timbre, and therefore, does begin to sound in that way. This in turn leads more people to expect similarly racialized bodies to also have that vocal timbre, and therefore, the process continues. Drawing on the theories of articulation from Stuart Hall (1986), Eidsheim refers to this circular process of vocal timbre-style associated with a particular body as “performed articulation” (Eidsheim 2009).

When further exploring the effect the social body has on the voice, I believe it is important to examine my own understanding of the concepts of self and identity as based on the theories of Thomas Turino. Turino defines the self as a body with all of the habits—habits that can include thought processes, gender performance, actions, and virtually anything—that accompany that body (2008, 95); on the other hand, identity, according to Turino, is a smaller subset within the category of self that are chosen to represent an individual (2008, 95). In this way identity becomes context-specific. This method of examining self and identity is extremely practical. In this manner, the researcher is allowed a concrete, material view of self and identity. The obvious downside, though, is that this view can only see the past of one’s self and identity. However, the past can provide good evidence to predict where one’s identity is going by showing what one has been. In this way, I plan to examine the past of the musical voice in the
GLBTQ community to better understand the current, ever changing, musical voice of the
GLBTQ community today and to explore what social traits may be engrained into the musical
social body.

**Historical Gay Musical Icons**

This section provides background on the historical musical women who have been key
gay icons and whose voices were used as the musical voice of the gay community. Here, I move
to the term “gay community” rather than “GLBTQ community” because most of the literature on
musical divas and the GLBTQ community specifically focuses on gay men (see Fikentscher
2000, Koestenbaum 1993, Dyer 1995). The three icons I explore are opera divas, Judy Garland,
and disco singers. This section is primarily concerned with the question: what was it about these
particular musical women that have attracted so many gay male fans? And furthermore, what is
engrained in their singing voices that gay men identifying with, either consciously or
unconsciously?

**Opera Singers**

While opera does not directly connect to popular music or the black musical practices
that I discuss later, opera singers are important for understanding the way gay men identify with
female singers in popular music. Gay men connect with opera singers because these divas
provide a site of identification for their own sexual desires of men and because they are role
models for understanding how to transform difference into power. Divas become a site of
identification that mirrors a particular aspect of the American Dream’s transformative power for
gay men.
In the book *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993), Wayne Koestenbaum provides a personal memoir of his experience as, what he calls, an “Opera Queen,” a gay man who is obsessed with opera divas. One of his early remarks on the connection between gay men and opera divas centers on the throat: he claims that the voice is the first point of identification of homosexuality; it is through the malleable voice that people first express their gay identity and it is through the voice that people learn to identify with a female star (Koestenbaum 1993). *In my own experience, this ideology rings true. I distinctly remember hearing my voice on a short film I was making with some friends when I was only thirteen years old, and I was shocked; I had never realized how “gay” I sounded. It is difficult to describe what sounded gay, though I do believe there was a particular way of intoning words that struck me. And that scared me. At the time I had no idea that I had gay tendencies. It was not until years later that I shared this memory with any of my friends (I was twenty four), and most people are shocked to hear I had this reaction, informing me that they do not feel I sound as excessively “gay” as I think. However, for me, it was in my voice that I first recognized my own sexuality.*

Koestenbaum makes a list—he marks lists early on as being a particular joy to opera queens—of the traits that he views as being essential to “the codes of diva conduct” (1993, 84). His five most striking are some of the key characteristics with which gay men identify. Furthermore, even though these five points are specific to opera divas for Koestenbaum, I would argue that these five points are involved in most of the gay man diva relationships, including popular music divas. Because of this connection, I will be analyzing Lady Gaga’s divaness using these points in Chapter 4. First, a diva is by definition a public figure, or as Koestenbaum states, “[w]hen we see a diva she is, by definition, out” (1993, 86). Divas are performers that sing and perform in public. They are not relegated to the private sphere; they are not forced into
a situation of hiding. Divas only exist because they exist in public, because they are performers. Divas become symbols of what it means to no longer be relegated to a private sphere, to be in “the closet” in relation to a queer individual. Much of the public discourse surrounding gay identity is strongly involved in what it means to be in or out of the closet (for popular culture references examining gay men in the closet, view television shows such as *Glee*’s second season, *Queer as Folk*’s first season, or the movie *The Trip*). This is precisely because there are still many GLBTQ individuals in the United States and around the world who are concerned about being rejected if they were to be open about their sexuality. Divas are alluring to gay men because they are not relegated to “the closet.”

Second, Koestenbaum explains, divas tend to have an origin story that is based in social or personal trauma. Though not entirely an origin story, the archetypal opera diva Maria Callas symbolizes the trauma of the beautiful voice that is lost. Koestenbaum writes, “[n]ot every origin of diva vocation is traumatic. But the conviction ‘I will sing!’ begins with a primary alienation and unhappiness. I am locked up; voice is the key to the prison door” (1993, 87). These origin stories of trauma become another key way gay men identify with divas. Gay men are able to identify with the trauma of a diva’s origin because many mark their coming out within moments of trauma. In fact, recent popular narratives of gay men are all based in traumatic experiences: *Philadelphia* (1993) is about a man suffering from AIDS, *Rent* (1994) has nearly an entire cast that is suffering from AIDS, the romantic comedy *The Trip* (2002) has a character who dies from AIDS, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) follows a man who cannot escape the closet and another man who dies in a hate crime, *Milk* (2008) follows the real life assassination of gay rights activist Harvey Milk, and the list goes on. However, the reason gay men identify with divas is not only because of trauma, but also because of the way that divas
respond to trauma: they survive and they thrive despite their own personal difficulties. This theme becomes important in popular music gay anthems, epitomized by Gloria Gaynor’s song “I Will Survive” (1978).

Third, for Koestenbaum, divas have larger than life personalities that often pull on camp aesthetics. Camp is, according to David Bergman in his edited volume *Camp Grounds*, (1) a style that promotes “exaggeration” and “artifice”; (2) is at odds with mainstream popular culture; (3) can only be recognized by someone outside of mainstream culture; and (4) is seen as integrally connected to homosexual culture (1993, 5). Regarding divas and personality, Koestenbaum quotes Mae West:

Personality is the most important thing to an actress’s success. You can sing like Flagstad or dance like Pavlova or act like Bernhardt, but if you haven’t personality you will never be a real star. Personality is the glitter that sends your little gleam across the footlights and the orchestra pit into that big black space where the audience is. (Mae West, quoted in 1993, 91)

The diva-to-be can perform this type of personality in many ways, but one of the most obvious is through fashion. Diva fashion sense rarely is focused on sexual attractiveness, but rather focuses on extravagant and artistic dress. When one thinks of the costumes of the opera stage, the outfits are extravagant and beyond what the average women would wear. This type of clothing is used to signify the otherness of the diva. Divas are set apart (almost isolated) from the average person.

According to Koestenbaum’s fourth diva characteristic, divas need to be seen as more inherently different from the average person. Divas use their fashion sense, their over-the-top
personalties, their traumatic origin stories, and their camp aesthetics as a way to mark themselves as different from the ordinary person. This difference is the key to a diva’s success, which leads to the final point of diva conduct: divas use their difference; they make that very difference into a source of power. “For the diva-to-be, difference is power; she seeks profit in her deviance,” writes Koestenbaum (1993, 91). The diva is famous because she is different, and then the diva becomes even more different because she is famous. After all, the average person is not a star; fans need to be convinced there is some reason to be a fan of a particular star. And the way a diva turns her difference into stardom is partially through her sheer will power. As Koestenbaum states, ”(t)he diva’s will to power culminates in a scene of vindication. What a thrill: the most monumental and unrealistic vision of herself turns out to be accurate!” (1993, 91).

Furthermore, this last point—that a diva can turn her difference into power—becomes one of the most important points of identification between a gay man and a diva: the gay man identifies with and is inspired by the diva’s ability to take her difference and marginality and turn it into her main point of power, her wealth, and her success. In this way the diva more or less provides a road map for how a gay man can become powerful himself; divas become people to be admired for their talent and for overcoming their own personal tragedies, and they also become role models for a community that has been marked by a word that signifies difference: queer.

**Judy Garland**

Judy Garland is a key historical gay icon to study to understand contemporary gay icons. Her fame and role as a popular musician are connected both to changes in technology and
reliance on her contemporary black musical practices². But before I can discuss Garland, I need to examine the role of technology in changing popular music. Of the technological changes that have irrevocably affected vocal timbre in popular music, the microphone is key. With microphones, singers no longer needed to sing in a manner that would project over an orchestra or other instruments and no longer needed to sing in a manner that assured that they would project acoustically. In Performing Rites, renowned popular music scholar Simon Frith explores some of the changes that the microphone allows singers. Frith explains that the microphone allowed popular singers to move from operatic singing that has a focus on projection and requires a particular style of vocal timbre to “crooners” who have more focus on portraying the individual singer’s personality, a trait that is still very important in popular music today (Frith 1996). The crooners were able to better showcase their own personality in their singing styles simply because they were able to use a style that emphasized a perceived closeness and intimacy through the microphone: extraneous vocal sounds were like breathing, nonvoiced sounds could be heard, and quieter sounds that seem similar to personal conversation could be used. Since divas already were required to showcase their personalities in order to become famous (as seen in the previous section), it is unsurprising that popular music divas used these new technologies to make their fans believe they were learning even more about the singers.

² The marketing of black musical practices has been and is an important component of American popular music. From Elvis’s covering of ‘Big Mama’ Thornton’s song “Hound Dog” (Halberstam 2007) to Amy Winehouse’s use of a virtual sonic “bluesface”—where she adopts nearly all of the stylistic markers of a black, blues singer (Brooks 2010)—popular music has a long history of white people using black musical practices. And the voices that have been connected to the musical voice of the GLBTQ communities have also been strongly affected by black musical practices.
Furthermore, much of the technology that affects popular music since the microphone expands upon this idea of making the audience feel “close” to the performer. In her book *Club Cultures* (1996), Sarah Thornton explores how the use of technology created the illusion of closeness to a star in 1990s popular music scenes. Recordings and music videos become ways in which music audiences can bring the star into their own personal space; and furthermore, music videos allow fans a view of a star that is much closer than they could ever get in a live performance. Thornton continues to explain that visual technology has become a larger part of live concerts (such as an enormous televised screen showing close ups of the star at stadium concerts) because audiences are more used to closeness afforded by technology than they are to unmediated live performances (1996).

Judy Garland’s fame and her connection to her gay fans are both dependent upon technology: Garland became famous as a film star and used a microphone to sing in a manner (torch singing) that made her seem particularly close to her fans, as if her listeners were getting to know her as a person and not just as a performer (Dyer 1986). Richard Dyer explores Garland’s impact on gay men in the chapter “Judy Garland and Gay Men” in his book *Heavenly Bodies* (1986). First, he provides a multiplicity of people’s experiences in connecting with her; and second, he details three key features in his own theory about Garland’s importance to the gay community. One of the most striking stories of connection with Garland—a story from Drew Griffiths—bears great resemblance to Koestenbaum’s codes of diva conduct:

They say we [gay men] loved her because she mirrored the anguish and loneliness of our own lives. Crap. My parents were straight…They were the most anguished and lonely people I ever knew. No. We do not have a monopoly in the anguish and loneliness department. I loved her because no matter how they put her down, she
survived. When they said she couldn’t sing; when they said she was drunk; when they said she was drugged; when they said she couldn’t keep a man…When they said she was fat; when they said she was thin; when they said she’d fallen flat on her face…She got up. (Greig and Griffiths 1981, 62, quoted in Dyer 1986, 147)

Griffiths clearly states that he is drawn to Garland not because of her traumatic past, but because of the way that she keeps going despite that past (a discourse that is clearly influenced by and mirrors many narratives of the American Dream). In other words, Garland turned her trauma into her victory. In this way, Garland continues the diva theme as a role model for her gay fans—no matter what happens, the diva—and the gay man—must keep going.

In his own theory about how gay men are drawn to Judy Garland, Dyer marks three key features about her: her androgyny, her perceived ordinariness, and her use of camp (1986). Dyer takes a reading of several of Garland’s film roles and one song that he claims marks her as androgynous: including *The Big Revue* (1929) where she wears men’s clothing, *Every Sunday* (1936) when she wore overalls, *Everybody Sings* (1938) where her character specifically does not respond to being asked if she is a boy or a girl, and the song “In Between” where the character sings about being in-between youth and adulthood; however, the phrase in-between was often used to address people perceived to be homosexual (Dyer 1986, 168-172). Many gay men identified with Garland because of her androgyny since gay men in her time period (and to an extent, our current time period) were seen as androgynous as well. As Dyer comments, “It is common in nineteenth and twentieth-century thought to conflate sexuality and gender” (1986, 168). Since sexuality is intimately tied to gender, homosexual men were seen as lacking in their masculinity and having feminine traits, and were therefore, androgynous. Judy Garland’s own
androgyny is one of the reasons Dyer argues she was so loved by the gay community. On the opposite spectrum, Garland’s perceived ordinariness also becomes a key point of identification. Dyer argues that Judy Garland’s performances as the ordinary girl-next-door character in her movies as opposed to her anything-but ordinary life off stage is what is so appealing to a gay fan because: “like Judy Garland, gay men are brought up to be ordinary. One is not brought up gay” (1986, 159). It is the perceived ordinariness that turns out not to be ordinariness at all that gay men identify with in Judy Garland since gay men are perceived to be ordinary (straight, heterosexual) until known differently. And finally, Dyer argues that gay men identify with Garland because she is camp. Dyer defines camp—which is a highly contested concept, perceived differently by different scholars (See Bergman 1993, Cleto 1999)—as being, “a characteristically gay way of handling values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialisation, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable” (1986, 178). Dyer believes that Garland’s use of camp was a key way that gay men saw Garland as declaring herself aligned with the gay community.

 Whereas Dyer focuses his writing on Garland in the way that she connects with her gay fans, Brian Currid instead discusses Garland’s connections with blackface aesthetics in his article, “Judy Garland’s American Drag” (2012). In this article, Curid explores the way that Judy Garland performed authentic Americanness through her use of blackface singing traditions because this tradition was seen as the authentic voice of America (2012, 129). He states that Garland’s connections to blackface singing style become apparent when we realize that her signature style of torch singing was associated with black singers (2012, 129); one of her early performances was of the piece “Stormy Weather,” a song that was originally written for black blues singer Ethel Waters (2012, 129), and that she twice gave tributes to blackface jazz singer
Al Jolson in her comeback concerts in London and New York (2012, 130). Garland’s co-opting of black musical practices, however, is not without precedent, as I previously discussed, American popular music often co-opts black musical practices.

In her article, “This Voice Which Is Not One” (2010), Princeton English professor Daphne Brooks adds to the scholarship that claims virtually all American popular musical forms are based on black musical traditions—a claim I am rearticulating here. Garland’s own connection to her gay fans was partially due to her own tradition of using black musical practices such as torch songs (Currid 2012, 129), yet in my own interactions and experiences, I have been unable to find someone who consciously thought of Judy Garland as singing in a black style until they read the literature that explores this aspect of her performances. However, Garland’s singing is clearly connected to black musical practices. Which leads me to the question: what could Garland’s connection to black singing imply about the grain of her voice?

Farah Jasmine Griffin provides an examination on the dual meaning of the female black voice both in some forms of public discourse and scholarly literature in her article “When Malindy Sings” (2004). She argues that the female black voice takes on a dual role as a symbol of guilt (because of the oppression of black women) and as a sign of nurturing (since black women have long taken care of people, both as mothers and as servants). What is most pertinent to this study, however, is where she places the origin of black musical practices: as originating in black female voices, and she places the origin of the black female voice within the black Christian church (2004, 106). If the black church truly is the origin of the black female voice, which in turn is the origin of all black musical practices, then there are numerous questions that need answering: do people hear the black voice as inherently more connected to the church and the sacred than other musical practices? Are black musical practices seen as more sacred
because of this connection? Do people actually hear the connection between the black musical voice and popular music? These are complicated questions; however, it begs the final question: even if people do not consciously hear the correlation between black musical practices and American popular music, is it still worthwhile to note the important influences of black musical practices? I would argue that it is because these practices are engrained into the history of the cultural self of American popular music.

**Disco Singers and Clubs**

Whereas Garland’s connection to black musical practices may not be clear to the lay listener, there is no argument that gay men’s identification with female disco singers clearly connects them to black performers. For the most part, female disco singers were black, which brings up issues of race, marginality, and a connection to the black church. Gay men identified with these disco singers because they were female and because they were black, both still partially disenfranchised groups in the 1970s. Here, I suggest that gay men identifying with these black women in this time period was a strategic maneuver to align their rights movement with the African-American civil rights movement.

In his article “In Defense of Disco,” Richard Dyer argues that disco can be understood through three main stylistic points: eroticism, romanticism, and materialism (1995). He also proposes that the eroticism of disco is in large part due to its emphasis on rhythm—a trait that comes from an Afro-American influence. Furthermore, the emphasis on rhythm becomes highly erotic in an American culture not because rhythm is inherently anymore erotic than any other musical trait, but because rhythm is associated with Afro-American musical practices in American culture, and American culture associates Afro-American practices more with the body
and the erotic (1995, 411). The idea that Afro-American musical practices are more connected to the body than European practices has a long and unfortunate history; however, it is also a concept that persists today: In her book *Dude, You’re a Fag!* (2007), C. J. Pascoe illuminates how African American boys are placed under more scrutiny from high school officials regarding sexual matters because they are seen as being inherently more sexual than their classmates. Romanticism in disco, for Dyer, is a particular style of romanticism, one that adores and focuses on the moment with the knowledge that all things are temporary. He specifically marks Diana Ross’s music as highlighting this quality, stating “No wonder Ross is (was?) so important in gay male scene culture, for she both reflects what that culture takes to be an inevitable reality (that relationship don’t last) and at the same time celebrates it, validates it” (Dyer 1995, 413). Finally, Dyer argues that disco is a materialist form of music and a celebration of materialism, and as such, should not be derided as simply a “capitalist” music category, but rather, has much to offer those influenced by socialist and other materialist ideologies (1995).

Kai Fikentscher further explores disco and underground dance music’s connection to gay men in his book *You Better Work* (2000). Here he argues that disco developed in underground dance music (better known as electronic dance music in the scholarly literature). The scenes that he researched were in New York and predominantly involved black gay men. He makes two strong arguments about the connection between gay men and these club scenes: first, the female singer becomes a site for identification; and second, the club takes on a role that is similar to the role of the black church for the gay black men in his study.

The link between female divas and gay men in disco and postdisco music is marginalization: the singers are doubly marginalized through being both black and women, just as many of the club attendees are doubly marginalized by being men of color and gay
(Fikentscher 2000). However, I argue that there is more at stake here: gay men connect with disco singers not simply because of a shared marginalization, but because these women embody a concept of self-respect. I suggest that gay men may also be identifying with the search for self-respect that was a key feature of a black identity from the 1960s onward, or as journalist Ann Powers states very elegantly, black women were working to, “‘discove[r] what you were already…and fin[d] that beautiful’ (Powers 1997, 94, quoted in Brooks 2010, 51). In this way the connection gay men felt with disco singers is similar to the connection previous gay men felt with Judy Garland: these women become symbols of never giving up, of self-respect and loving who you are.

Fikentscher’s second argument is that the underground club scene, for many individuals, became a location that served a function similar to the black church. Where the black church served as a place where African-Americans could be unabashedly “black” in a time when blackness, as a cultural phenomenon, was discouraged (some would say it is still discouraged), the underground dance club scene became a place where many gay black men could act unabashedly gay and black when gayness was discouraged (Fikentscher 2000). In this way, the underground dance club scene became a safe-space, free from the cultural forces that were oppressive to the sexuality of those who frequented these clubs. Furthermore, the clubs also served a semi-religious function for the participants in Fikentscher’s study. Many participants discuss the sense of community and transcendent-like experiences they had while dancing in a club with a good DJ (Fikentscher 2000).

In both of these arguments, however, the connection with the black community is strongly affirmed. The connection of GLBTQ identity to blackness in America is not a haphazard association: the GLBTQ community and those supporting its rights often make the
discursive comparison between GLBTQ people and black individuals as groups that were both marginalized in America. This discourse, however, is one that is and has been highly contested. In May 2012, a composite image circulated on Facebook showing people protesting segregation in the top photo, and people protesting same-sex marriage in the bottom photo with the caption, “Discrimination: Now in color.” In the book *God Hates Fags*, Michael Cobbs elaborates on the importance of a discursive connection between the GLBTQ community and African Americans (2006). He explains that the GLBTQ community gains legitimacy by being compared to the previous civil rights movement that occurred for African Americans. Furthermore, he argues that the rhetoric of religious hate towards the GLBTQ community reifies this connection: much as racial slurs were used to support segregation of whites and black, religious hate slurs are used against the GLBTQ community to justify unequal laws regarding these individuals. The discursive association between African Americans’ struggle for civil rights and the GLBTQ rights movement is in every way strategic. And as it becomes apparent, the use of black voices as a locus of identification for the GLBTQ community has also been a strategic maneuver.

As I have previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the movement for African American civil rights served as a key model for GLBTQ rights historically as well (Eaklor 2008). Much as the civil rights movement worked for self worth in slogans such as “black is beautiful,” the GLBTQ rights movement has mimicked this in its own slogan “gay is good.” Now, rather than simply being a model for GLBTQ rights, African American civil rights becomes a point of comparison for GLBTQ rights in a way to further make people feel that it is appropriate for GLBTQ individuals to have equal rights in a manner reminiscent of the evangelical preaching style. And this felt connection between GLBTQ rights and African American civil rights (a rights
movement that extensively used religious narratives) is seen in the social body of the musical voice.

**Conclusions**

To summarize, gay men have historically used a musical voice that is not their own embodied voice; however, this voice has become that of the gay community through a process that I refer to as strategic identification. Strategic identification is when music is identified with in a strategic, political manner for identity purposes. While the current gay anthems do provide insight into the contemporary GLBTQ rights movement by highlighting assimilation and self-worth, there are also three archetypes that I explore that have been strategically identified with historically by gay men: opera singers, Judy Garland, and disco singers. While opera singers provide a framework for understanding the link between gay men and divas—divas become a role model for gay men since divas are able to turn their own trauma and difference into their source of power—popular musicians delve into ideas that are firmly entrenched in American Dream ideology: Judy Garland represents the archetype of never giving up despite the many obstacles she faced and disco singers represent having self-respect and love for oneself in a time when society did not offer any. Finally, though it is important to examine the grain of one’s voice, the body is difficult to explore as a purely material object and should be understood in a dialogue with the culture and society within which it exists, thus making it a social body. The implications of a social body and strategic identification can change the way that the musical voice of GLBTQ communities are be understood since it complicates the issue of using a voice that is not one’s own. Furthermore, it corroborates the connections between the GLBTQ rights movement and the African American civil rights movement—a movement that had a religious leader at its helm, Martin Luther King, Jr.
On April 27, 2011, I was able to attend the Cleveland concert of one of my absolute favorite pop stars: Lady Gaga. As a young (mid twenties) gay man, I was enthralled by Gaga. There was something about this star who seemed to have no limitations in her performances or in her life: she would set pianos on fire during music awards ceremonies, wore the most outrageous outfits, and she could even sing well. To me, it seemed as though she could easily be the person she wanted to be with no worries about what other people wanted her to be—a trait that I could sometimes only wish I had—so I was understandably excited when I knew I was going to be able to see her. There was one moment in “The Monster Ball” that struck me more than anything else in this entire concert: this was when our hostess, Lady Gaga, introduced her guitarist, Kareem Devlin. As she lay on the floor between his legs, Gaga looked up at him and declared, “This is Jesus.” Though this comment was a little shocking, it was not that far off. He had long hair and a beard that really did resemble the image most often depicted of Jesus in American popular culture. She continued, “I like Jesus because he likes Cleveland girls. I like Jesus because he also likes Cleveland boys. I like Jesus because he loves everybody.” The audience started cheering and screaming so loud that Gaga had to start shouting to be heard. I was stunned. Growing up Catholic, and familiar with the religiously charged language of the same-sex marriage debate, I couldn’t believe that such a significant gay icon had just made that reference. Also, as a self-identified spiritual gay man, I have often felt trapped between two
communities that could never intersect. And now this woman who seemed like she could do anything made that intersection happen, simply by introducing a guitarist.

This chapter explores the significance of Lady Gaga’s support of GLBTQ rights, articulated in Christian-inspired language, and the ensuing implications for GLBTQ individuals in the current American political climate. I look at Lady Gaga’s connection to the GLBTQ community as a prominent gay icon. Gaga’s connection to the gay community is both deep and intentional, evidenced by the fact that she has made her connection to her gay fans more explicit than any previous mainstream pop star has done. Then, I examine the rhetoric within the same-sex marriage debate to detail the ways that religion and GLBTQ identity have been polarized in the United States. This rhetoric creates a perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity that connects to a history of associating American identity with spiritual beliefs. I place the use of religious language within the same-sex marriage debate and conservative politics within this context. Finally, I detail Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language in her “The Monster Ball” tour as well as her album *Born This Way*. Her use of this language is both timely and strategic, as it is a direct response to the use of religious language against GLBTQ Americans.

**Lady Gaga and the Gay Community**

Lady Gaga is arguably the most prominent and powerful gay icon to come onto the music scene in the first decade of the new millennium. As noted by Dan Zak in a *Washington Post* article on October 12, 2009, Gaga was asked to speak at the 2009 Human Rights Campaign dinner and she was also deeply involved in a National Equality March—a march to fight for same-sex marriage laws—in Washington D. C. the same year. Furthermore, Gaga has been
deeply accepted by many in the gay community, as is revealed in this quote about her attendance and speeches at the Human Rights Campaign dinner:

“It's almost like Martin Luther King and the civil rights speeches,” said gala attendee Daniel Campbell, 23, who works at a downtown CVS and at Reagan National Airport.

"We have a voice." (Zak 2009)

Gaga’s connection to the GLBTQ community—with a great deal of emphasis on the gay men—is not at all surprising: much of the narratives that surround her and her political work both implicitly and explicitly connect her to this community.

In this section I look at Gaga’s connection with the gay community. While there is a critique of Lady Gaga as only using her social and political work to further her rise as a star (Callahan 2010), I instead argue that Gaga is truly invested in her GLBTQ fans in a personal manner and her work can be seen as subversive and supportive. I discuss some of the traits of Gaga’s music that support her connection to her gay and lesbian fans. Then, I detail the depth of her relationship with her fans, focusing on that with her LGBTQ and other marginalized fans. Next, I delve into her status as a diva and explain how this enables her to have a deep relationship with her gay fans. Finally, I examine the political work that Lady Gaga has done for LGBTQ rights. A brief examination of her political work shows the context of her broader LGBTQ support and why her language choice is important.

**Lady Gaga’s Music and Gay Men**

In this section, I discuss some of the specifics of Lady Gaga’s music that help her connect to gay men. In particular, I explore how Lady Gaga’s music often discusses her own desire and attraction to men by desiring the male body. This is different from many other songs by
contemporary female artists who instead focus on how they are desired by men, focusing on their own sexual availability rather than their own desire for a male body. A few examples of songs by women that do not express direct interest in the male body but rather focus on female sexual availability are “California Gurls” by Katy Perry, “Love Song” by Taylor Swift, or “I Kissed a Girl” by Katie Perry. The subject of “California Gurls” is the beauty and attractiveness of California girls; the subject of “Love Song” is a girl being in love and waiting for permission from her father to be able to marry this man—if he asks; and the subject of “I Kissed a Girl” is a woman (who has a boyfriend) kissing a girl at a party—most likely commenting on the common straight-male fantasy of women kissing. I offer these examples, not to say there are no other songs that discuss desire of a male as their subjects, rather, there are fewer songs that express desire for a male body than a female body.

Lady Gaga, on the other hand, included many songs on her very first album dealing explicitly with desire for a male object. By focusing on the desire for the male body, Gaga begins the process of mainstreaming desire for a male body in popular culture. Three songs that deal with Gaga’s desire for men directly are “Boys Boys Boys,” “Love Game,” and “Teeth.” In “Boys Boys Boys,” Gaga sings about men and all of the reasons that she likes boys. The song can be read as relatively heteronormative in which a gushing woman talks about all of the boys she thinks are cute; however, this song can be seen as transgressive because it turns boys into the sexual object rather than the a sexual agent. I consider this a transgressive move because many scholars believe men view masculinity as defined by their agency and their ability to reject the feminine in themselves, often by making objects of women (Jarmen-Ivens 2007, Pascoe 2007, Rich 1980).
Lady Gaga completes her idea of turning a male into a sexual object further in “Love Game.” One of the two choruses to this song states:

Let’s have some fun
This beat is sick,
I wanna take a ride on your disco stick (Lady Gaga)

This song moves away from the idea of a gushing girl talking about all of the cute boys that she is interested in; instead, this song is about an adult who is discussing very vivid desires of a male body in a metaphor that is so close to reality it is almost not a metaphor in the use of the phrase “disco stick.” To show how this differs from some other uses of metaphors for penises in songs, I would like to briefly discuss Katie Perry’s use in “California Gurls.” Perry’s metaphor for penis comes in the line, “so hot we’ll melt your Popsicle,” (Perry 2010) where the emphasis is placed on a pleasurable experience for the one who has the penis, as opposed to Gaga’s use where the emphasis is on desire for that penis. This is a subtle but important difference.

Gaga continues to discuss men in an explicitly sexual fashion in her song “Teeth.” In “Teeth,” Gaga makes many statements that are overtly sexual, such as, “open your mouth, boy,” (Lady Gaga 2009) and, “just want your sex” (Lady Gaga 2009). The entire song is very sexual and is reminiscent of blues music, a genre whose associations with strength and power have traditionally been linked with masculinity. I believe this makes the song even easier for gay men to associate with due to the style.

Lady Gaga’s Connection with her Fans

Lady Gaga has an extremely close relationship with her fans. In fact, Brian Hiatt details Gaga’s feelings on her relationship with her fans in the June 9, 2011 issue of Rolling Stones:
What's changed most about Gaga is a newfound sense of mission, coupled with a symbiotic, almost unnervingly intense connection with her fans. "We have this umbilical cord that I don't want to cut, ever," she says. "I don't feel that they suck me dry. It would be so mean, wouldn't it, to say, 'For the next month, I'm going to cut myself off from my fans so I can be a person.' What does that mean? They are part of my person, they are so much of my person. They're at least 50 percent, if not more." (Hiatt 2011)

Furthermore, this connection Lady Gaga feels with her fans is not one-sided. Many of her fans also feel particularly close to her. Later in this same article, Hiatt details seeing an open fan letter to Lady Gaga from a fifteen year old boy:

[H]andwritten in heart-wrenchingly neat print on lined school paper: "I am an extremely devoted little monster, and I'll be a little monster for life. At every concert you've said that you want to liberate us, and that is what you've done. Your songs have taught me to not listen to haters and be who I am, because, baby, I was born this way!" (Hiatt 2011)

This letter has two facets that has become a key identity point surrounding Lady Gaga fans. First, the fan describes himself as a “little monster”—the name that Gaga has dubbed her fans. Drawing on the name of her album *The Fame Monster*, Gaga refers to her fans as little monsters, while she is mother monster—drawing on a familial language for her fans. Second, the fan draws on Gaga’s message of self-acceptance and love that was solidified in her song “Born This Way” by quoting its lyrics to end his letter.

Lady Gaga also works to show this personal communication with her fans, using social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to be able to communicate with her fans and by
communicating with fans during her concerts. When I attended “The Monster’s Ball” concert in Cleveland on April 27, 2011, there were many opportunities to win seats in the front row section by texting in answers to questions about Lady Gaga’s past. Beyond giving dedicated fans the opportunity to get better seats, these trivia games allowed the concert organizers to get the cell phone numbers of people who were attending the concert. Near the half-way point of Gaga’s performance, she made a phone call to someone in the audience whose number had been collected from the trivia games. She spoke with this fan—who was extremely emotional speaking with Lady Gaga, letting her know what an influence she has made in his life—and she became very emotional, on the verge of crying, while speaking with this fan. Of all of the popular music concerts I have ever attended, I have never seen the star call an audience member and have a conversation with them during a concert.

Gaga’s special connection with her fans has been noticed by public companies as well. Google ran a commercial in 2011 for their Google Chrome browser that also comments on Lady Gaga and her fans. (The commercial can be found on YouTube at the link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDPJ-o1leAw.) In the commercial, viewers see Lady Gaga typing tweets to her fans and then many videos of fans doing covers or lip synching to her songs. The message is very clear how much of an effect she has had on her fans, and truly works to pull at one’s heart strings. Two of the most touching short covers done on this commercial utilize several young men—some of whom appear to be gay due to Gaga’s strong relationship with gay men—singing along to “Edge of Glory” and a segment where a man with only one complete arm is playing guitar and singing along. This commercial highlights how much Gaga’s message of self-love and acceptance resonates with her fans, many of whom have been marginalized in American society.
Within the formal interviews that I conducted, both Matthew Christie (local Bowling Green, Ohio Lady Gaga fan) and Jonas Grey (2011 Chicago Gay Pride Parade attendee) explicitly discuss the importance of Lady Gaga to her GLBTQ fans. Grey believes that her connection to her fans—with him in particular—is epitomized in her song “The Edge of Glory.” For Grey, this song has an undertone of what he refers to as “joyful defiance” that also serves as the backdrop for much of Lady Gaga’s music and actions. In Grey’s own words, joyful defiance refers to an attitude where one knows, “I am who I am, and I love it. So fuck you if you disagree.” He believes that this is the underlying message of much of Lady Gaga’s work and he also believes that it is this message that is so needed by the GLBTQ youth because of societal standards that make GLBTQ youth feel as if they are not good enough the way they are. Furthermore, he differentiates this type of “joyful defiance” from a more aggressive, militant defiance that he believes underscored much of the GLBTQ language previously (Interview, June 19, 2012).

Christie also notes on the importance of Lady Gaga. In discussing his attendance at Lady Gaga’s concerts, Christie states:

I was expecting a concert just like every other concert I’ve been to. And to compare, I’ve been to the typical gay concert like Britney Spears….you go there expecting them to do their thing, have cool dances…and say hello and talk about themselves…but when you go see Lady Gaga in concert you feel like you really get to know her, and what she’s about, what she believes. And you see that she really does work and perform for her fans. (Interview, February 24, 2012)
Christie elaborates on what the connection is between Lady Gaga and her fans in a similar language to that of Grey’s joyfully defiant comments. He mentions at one point in her concert, Gaga performs a speech telling her fans to free themselves and:

[F]orget about all the people who’ve told you can’t sing well enough, or dance well enough, or can’t write music, or all these things that…you’re not good enough. She’s like, just tell them you’re a star and you were born that way and you can do whatever you want. And it is just about self-empowerment…it is really just to strengthen yourself. And I think it is just such a powerful show. (Interview, February 24, 2012)

For both Grey and Christie, Gaga provides an important message of defiance in a more positive way that can be used to help the GLBTQ community.

One way Lady Gaga creates such a seemingly strong relationship with her gay male fans is by drawing on narratives of divaness. (I would argue that she also has a strong relationship with her female fans; however, this thesis focuses on her connection with gay men.) In his book The Queen’s Throat (1993), Wayne Koestenbaum discusses why opera divas often resonant with gay men. For Koestenbaum, the diva connects with gay men because divas provide a narrative of hope for gay men (or anyone who is marginalized really). Koestenbaum compares these narratives to a fairy tale situation where, “the good fairy [is] telling the little ‘nelly’ that she is not unnatural, she is supernatural: she is not odd, she is extraordinary” (1993, 93). In a very similar way, Lady Gaga has become one of those “good fairies” who is telling her fans that they are “not unnatural.” Rather, Gaga is telling her fans they are extraordinary. And in order to make this message clear, Gaga clearly draws on a narrative of divaness in her performances and in her life.
**Lady Gaga as a Diva**

One of the primary ways that Lady Gaga connects to her gay fans is by drawing on narratives of divaness in her public persona and personal history. For this thesis, my definition of a diva is inspired by Wayne Koestenbaum’s book *The Queen’s Throat* (1993). I am going to focus on the five traits from this book, detailed in my Chapter 2, that Koestenbaum marks as fundamental aspects of divaness: (1) divas are public performers; (2) divas tend to have a traumatic origin story, or one of not fitting in; (3) divas have larger than life personalities; (4) divas are inherently different than the ordinary person; and (5) divas can turn their difference into their power. Each of these five traits strongly connects to Lady Gaga; and furthermore, each of these traits supports Lady Gaga in connecting with her gay fans.

**Divas as Public Figures**

The first trait of a diva is her publicness—the fact that she is out in the public sphere. Lady Gaga is a very public performer. Her music is played on the radio almost constantly, her appearances at music award ceremonies are highly discussed by the media, and she is in the public eye virtually constantly. Furthermore, Gaga is in the public not by the name of her birth, but rather as the name she has taken on as a public performer, being Lady Gaga and not Stefani Germanotta. She is almost always seen in public as Lady Gaga—wearing extravagant outfits and acting in an over-the-top manner—and is rarely seen as being the private persona of Stefani. In fact, her public persona sometimes even doubts the existence of a personal persona by seeing it as merely a past, false, version of herself as seen in this quote from the *Rolling Stones* article from 2009 by Brian Hiatt:
I've always been Gaga… It's just that all the years of schooling and being in a Catholic environment and living in a place where we were kind of told what was the right way to be, I suppressed all those eccentricities about myself so I could fit in. Once I was free, I was able to be myself. I pulled her out of me, and I found that all of the things about myself that I so desperately tried to suppress for so many years were the very things that all my art and music friends thought were so lovely about me, so I embraced them.

(Hiatt 2009)

Her transformation and denial of her previous, personal persona is not at all uncommon amongst divas. In discussing opera divas, Koestenbaum states, “The diva hasn’t yet arrived at herself; she is in a continual, gratifying state of becoming…Long ago in the diva’s life; she was not herself; she tries to forget that alienated prehistory” (Koestenbaum, 86), where the prehistory here references the time before one was a public diva.

This publicness of Gaga is one of the great draws she has for gay men. In my own experience, Lady Gaga’s rise to fame meant so much to me as a gay man because she has often been very explicit in her support of GLBTQ individuals. To me, her fame meant that there could be a growing acceptance of other people like me. Furthermore, I am not the only person I know who holds this sentiment. In our interview, Matthew Christie discussed how important Lady Gaga’s fame is since it first became obvious that GLBTQ rights is her primary mission of social change. Her mainstream appeal to such a large fan base helped him to see the possibility of GLBTQ individuals being accepted as part of mainstream society, which is something that he wishes for greatly:
The last thing I want is to have my own rights within a separate group. I don’t want to be thought of as part of a separate group. I’m a person just like anyone else is and I have made no choice other than to be open about who I am. So why would I settle for having rights within my group? What is the group? It should just be the human race.

(Interview, February 24, 2012)

**Traumatic Origin Stories**

The second key trait of many divas is a traumatic origin story. Lady Gaga has reiterated stories that set her origin as a super star as a traumatic one. In many of her interviews, she often discusses how she was bullied in her high school years at the Catholic high school Convent of the Sacred Heart and how when she dropped out of New York University to pursue her career in music she turned to cocaine (Hiatt 2009). Her story is one that is very important for two reasons. First, it firmly establishes her as a diva because of her traumatic experiences that helped her find *her voice* in order to become famous. Part of what makes a diva become a diva is her ability to turn difference and trauma into her own personal power (a concept I am going to explore in further detail later in this section). Second, her stories of being bullied become an important way in which Gaga works to connect to her fans because many of her fans probably feel bullied or are bullied.

Bullying has been recognized as an extremely important issue for many GLBTQ youth. The fact that there was a need for the “It Gets Better” YouTube campaign for suicide prevention reveals how deep and intensely many GLBTQ people feel bullied and isolated. By framing her own personal historical narrative as one of being bullied in her youth and then rising in success to become one of the most powerful pop stars in the world, Gaga is creating a possible roadmap
for her own fans to follow. Gaga’s narratives of overcoming bullying become a way for her to connect with her GLBTQ fans, and their similar experiences.

**Larger-than-life Personality**

Divas must have a larger-than-life personality. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Mae West believed in the importance of personality: “Personality is the most important thing to an actress’s success” (Mae West, quoted in Koestenbaum, 91). While personality is important to any aspiring star, as seen in the quote above by Mae West, I argue that a larger-than-life personality is even more important for a gay icon because of the history of camp aesthetics within the gay community.

As I mentioned in chapter 3, camp is (1) a style that promotes “exaggeration” and “artifice”; (2) is at odds with mainstream popular culture; (3) can only be recognized by someone outside of mainstream culture; and (4) is seen as integrally connected to homosexual culture (Bergman 1993, 5). Furthermore, camp is often “a characteristically gay way of handling values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialisation, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable” (Dyer 1986, 178). Lady Gaga clearly does portray a larger-than-life personality in her theatricality and irony, strongly drawing on camp aesthetics in her performances. However, if camp is meant to be at odds with the mainstream, Lady Gaga’s fame may point to what was once camp becoming mainstream. After all, when she was just becoming famous, her over-the-top performances were something unusual. Now, it is not uncommon for almost any female pop singer to also have over-the-top performances that also use camp aesthetics.
**Diva as Different**

Gaga is always known for doing something ‘different’ or unusual and theatrical, using her own larger-than-life personality and camp aesthetics that I just discussed. There are many examples of her acting different, but a short list would include, her performance at the Video Music Awards of “Paparazzi” in 2009 where she acted as if she was shot and would bleed to death in front of the entire audience, or her performance with Elton John at the 2010 Grammys, or her 2010 Video Music Awards when she broke through a glass wall to get to her piano, lit the piano on fire, and then smashed liquor bottles on the piano for her song “Speechless.” Then, there is always the fact that Lady Gaga self-identifies as bisexual, though she does state that her attraction to women is purely physical (Hiatt 2009). In fact, her identification as sexually different was the theme of her song “Poker Face” where she states at one point, “I’m bluffin with my Muffin,” (Lady Gaga 2009).

Of course, one of the main aspects of Lady Gaga’s otherness is her clothing. More so than any other contemporary popular musician, Lady Gaga has become synonymous with edgy fashion and unusual clothing, and I would argue that her outrageous outfits are a sign of her over-the-top personality. Gaga’s extravagant outfits are almost too numerous to count, but some of the more memorable outfits consist of the infamous “Meat dress” that is currently at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, the full body red-lace gown that she wore to the Video Music Awards (VMAs) in 2009, the red gown made of PVC that she wore to perform for Queen Elizabeth that had a 20 foot long train to go all the way down to the floor from the trapeze that she was sitting on to play the piano. She was even named the Council of Fashion Designers of America 2011 Fashion Icon of the Year. In her acceptance, she pointed to how much being named a fashion icon meant to her because of fashion’s significance to her and her fans:
My fans, some of them don't know who they are and they have so much trouble. They come to the Monster Ball to find who they are and they wake up in the morning and it's that leather jacket that makes them feel like they can be anyone. Or it's that YSL blazer that they saw in the window that makes them feel like they could be president one day. Fashion means so much to them. It's really hard to talk about. (Moss 2011)

What is important to note is that Lady Gaga connects fashion to her overall message of freeness in the above quote.

**Difference into Power**

Lady Gaga’s ability to turn her perceived differences into her personal power—her immense wealth, fame, and growing political power—is the final trait that truly connects Gaga to her many LGBTQ fans. Lady Gaga has worked to take her perceived differences and turn them into power for herself—just as a diva should. She was listed as 2011’s most powerful celebrity by Forbes in their 100 most powerful celebrities (Pomerantz 2011) and has become one of the biggest names in all of popular music. Gaga has been able to take all of the ways that she is perceived as different—her sexuality, her excessive fashion sense, her over-the-top personality, her interest in performance art—and turn them into her greatest source of power. Gaga’s fame is in many ways connected to the fact that she is different—more extravagant, more outrageous, and more political—than almost any other pop musician on the music scene today.

As previously mentioned, Gaga draws on a narrative of personal trauma—being bullied in school and having society pressure her into being someone that she did not feel was really her—only to overcome these experiences, and then turn these aspects into her personal power, or in her own words:
I found that all of the things about myself that I so desperately tried to suppress for so many years were the very things that all my art and music friends thought were so lovely about me, so I embraced them. (Hiatt 2009)

By overcoming adversities, Gaga becomes a diva because she transcends being a pop star and becomes a possible role model and example of how her fans could also thrive despite their own traumas and limitations. And as I also previously mentioned, many of Gaga’s fans who are GLBTQ individuals may have dealt with issues of bullying, so these same fans can see themselves overcome the same issue of bullying much like Gaga did.

Lady Gaga’s ability to turn her difference into her own personal power—and mainstream popularity—is perhaps the most powerful reason that she is popular amongst GLBTQ individuals. As shown in the above sections, her large level fame and popularity considering her explicit connection to the GLBTQ community has given hope to many that GLBTQ identity can one day also be accepted. And furthermore, Gaga did not become popular by ignoring who she felt she was, but rather became popular by emphasizing what makes her unique. The belief that one can be accepted not only despite but because of their differences is an appealing sentiment for the GLBTQ community. However, Lady Gaga’s connection to the GLBTQ community is not only made through her social means, but also through her political work for this community.

**Lady Gaga’s Political Work for GLBTQ Rights**

Lady Gaga has made her relationship to gay fans very clear through her political work to support GLBTQ rights in the United States. In regards to politics, she has been particularly vocal on the issues of the military policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and marriage equality. Marriage equality is the campaign to pass same-sex marriage laws—something Gaga is clearly
interested in as evidenced by her attendance at both the March For Equality and the Human Rights Campaign dinner. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was the United States military policy that gay and lesbian soldiers can be discharged for being openly gay or lesbian; however, the military officials were supposed to refrain from asking questions about a soldier’s sexual orientation. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell has been a much contested issue in American politics as gay and lesbian individuals often believe that the “Don’t Ask” part of the policy has not been upheld. Current President Barack Obama had stated during his election campaign that he would put an end to Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell; however, the process continued to be slow and long. Though elected in 2008, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell remained military policy until September of 2011.

Lady Gaga became increasingly vocal on her opinion that Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell needed to be repealed in September of 2010. On September 17, 2010, she released a video message that she directed to the Senate. In the video, she discusses the history of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and some of the reasons many people state that the law had been enforced improperly. She then makes a plea for the US senate to vote for repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell in the upcoming vote for this law. She then continued to call her Senator on the video to tell him about why she wishes for him to vote for repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (Lady Gaga 2010). This video is extremely interesting for two primary reasons. First, this video is one of only a few times that I am aware of Lady Gaga publically using her given name, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta. In fact, she mostly only uses her given name when she was addressing political issues towards the Senate.

Second, Gaga marks herself as a voice for the young generation she is trying to represent. This is clear because she directly states she is such a voice in her video; however, the phone call she makes to her Senator shows the frustration many young people feel towards their
government officials. By calling her senator, being put on hold, and then finally dropped from the call because the senator’s voicemail was full, Lady Gaga is making clear how unheard many young people feel about their government officials. Gaga then leaves the message on her video that she wanted to leave on the Senator’s voicemail. She finishes by asking her fans to call their senators just like and to keep trying until they are heard.

Lady Gaga has also made speeches against Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, such as her “Prime Rib of America” Speech delivered in Portland, Maine. This speech was delivered to the “For the 14,000” rally given to repeal Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. In this speech, Lady Gaga continues to debate against the reasons given for why this law should be in place. At the end of her speech, she states, “Equality is the prime rib of what we stand for as a nation. And I don’t get to enjoy the greatest cut of meat that my country has to offer. Are you listening?” (Lady Gaga 2010). Even in this speech, Lady Gaga is connecting to her audience by making clear the feeling that many young people have about their government: the feeling that no one is listening. She fights this feeling of being unheard by making herself heard in every way that she could. Lady Gaga had soldiers who had been discharged under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell accompany her as escorts to the Video Music Awards ceremony, creating a great deal of publicity surrounding the issue. In this way, it is very clear that Lady Gaga creates a connection to gay individuals through political means; however, I also believe that Lady Gaga’s origin narrative and diva status connect her to her gay fans.

Before I discuss Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language in her support of GLBTQ individuals, I need to contextualize other ways that religious language is being used in regards to GLBTQ people in America. This context will only further show why her choice of language is timely in the GLBTQ rights movement.
Same-sex Marriage, Religious Language and (un)Americanness

The issue of same-sex marriage is arguably the most prominent and pressing political issue affecting GLBTQ individuals currently. In the summer of 2012, same-sex marriage debate turned into a media firestorm as many articles were released about the American fast-food chain Chick-fil-A. Chick-fil-A’s president Dan Cathy publically announced his disagreement on same-sex marriage, or as Steve Salbu states in the August 1, 2012 issue of the *New York Times*, “He [Cathy] advocated for what he called “the biblical definition of the family unit” and observed that supporting same-sex marriage invites “God’s judgment on our nation’”’ (Salbu 2012).

Cathy’s comments firmly entrench the marriage debate into American exceptionalism, reminding the public that America’s exceptionalism relies upon upholding a particular moral code, which he does not believe allows for same-sex marriage. Salbu continues to show that response to Cathy’s comments was quick and decisive, with several major cities’ politicians taking stands against Chick-fil-A because of Cathy’s comments, including Boston’s Mayor Thomas Menino. In response to much political rallying against the restaurant chain, former Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee organized “Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day” to show support for the business. The fact that high level politicians would even care about a fast-food chain points to the level of cultural significance that the same-sex marriage debate has acquired, even making what chicken sandwich one buys a political stance. Even though this issue is obviously thoroughly contested, the debate surrounding this issue is almost less culturally significant than the rhetoric that is being used in opposition to same-sex marriage.

The language that is being used to argue against same-sex marriage is implicitly and often explicitly religious in nature. Within the Chick-fil-A debate alone, the explicitly Christian language is obvious: Cathy’s stated reason for being against same-sex marriage is because he
stands by a “biblical” definition of marriage and even goes so far as to claim that choosing to change marriage from what he perceives to be the biblical definition would bring, “God’s judgment on our nation” (Salbu 2012). Cathy’s explicit use of religious language against same-sex marriage is not without precedent. Many opponents of same-sex marriage often invoke a desire to protect the sanctity of marriage, connecting marriage to sacral religious contexts in an implicit way. Why is the sacredness of marriage so important in America when LGBTQ individuals wish to get married? And furthermore, why is a religious rhetoric being used almost exclusively against GLBTQ Americans?

In this section, I am going to contextualize the cultural importance of the religious language being used to combat same-sex marriage and GLBTQ individuals. In order to understand the significance of religious inspired language in this debate, I will draw upon the ideas of Michael Cobb from his book *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (2006). In this book, Cobb explores the history of religion as a marker of Americanness and looks at how religious rhetoric gains particular emotional significance when discussing political issues, allowing him to contextualize the religious rhetoric of hate against queer Americans. Then, I will place Cobb’s arguments within the history of civil religion in America. Civil religion has existed and developed along with sacral religion and the line between the two is becoming increasingly blurred in our current political landscape. Finally, I will look at how civil religion was used as an identity marker of Americanness in the Cold War as well as how civil religion has been used as a means of reifying who is not deemed American. This history can provide insight into the implications of a political rhetoric that separates religion and LGBTQ identity.
Religious Language and GLBTQ Identity

In God Hates Fags (2006), Michael Cobb analyzes the language of religious hate being used against queer Americans, gaining its title from the infamous Westboro Baptists Church’s slogan. While many people mark Westboro as an extreme group that should not be seen as indicating mainstream opinions on homosexuality, Cobb argues that this hate is mainstream:

[I]t is important to relate his church’s outrageous hyperbole to the kinds of public, doctrinal, financial, and political gains opposition to “homosexuality” has provided for the powerful Christian organizations, not to mention the Republican Party, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (2006, 3)

Drawing on the work of Perry Miller, Cobb compares the current religious intolerance towards GLBTQ Americans to the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad—a particular preaching style that focuses on America’s fall from grace and urges a return to a time that is perceived to be more sacred. This tradition gained much of its power by choosing one group to become a scapegoat that would be blamed for the decline in the nation and this group would be rhetorically exiled in order to allow the remaining members of society to regain their grace (2006, 7). GLBTQ Americans have currently become the scapegoats for many jeremiads. And a religiously inspired language is at the forefront of rhetorically exiling GLBTQ Americans from the United States.

Religious rhetoric is particularly meaningful in the United States, offering a level of authority unlike almost any other type of rhetoric. As I discussed in the introduction to this these, Cobb argues that the special meaning—and authority—of religious language comes from a sense of security, since, “religious language is thought to be a secure form of language” (2006, 22). He believes that the security of religious language is due to American Evangelicals
believing “God’s word” to be infallible. This infallibility of sacred texts makes the language safe and difficult to argue against. Furthermore, he details that the implications of the infallible notion of “God’s Word” means that any argument made within a religious rhetoric automatically feels more authoritative and is less likely to be dismissed or challenged. Finally, he discusses religious language as an extremely powerful emotional tool within contested political arguments. And as I have previously shown, the power of emotion is of particular importance in American discourses due to the history of making people feel an opinion is accurate in many reform movements (Eaklor 2008, 21-22).

The polarization of religion and GLBTQ identity in America also has another political significance. As I mentioned in chapter 1, in addition to sacral religion, America also has a civil religion. This civil religion is defined by Robert Bellah as “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” ([1967] 2005, 42) that are shared amongst the American people, and employed to articulate sacred ideas about the nation. One shared belief that has become associated with Americanness is the belief in a higher power or God. However, I would like to point out that this belief in a God is by no means explicitly the Christian God, as made clear by President Eisenhower in “Civil Religion in America”: “[o]ur government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is” (Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in Herberg 1955: 97, quoted in Bellah [1967] 2005: 42). This shared belief of a higher power has also been historically used as a means of designating who is and who is not culturally American, particularly during the cold war where civil religion was used as a means of differentiating Americans from the “godless communists” (Bates 2004, Canipe 2003). Considering that much of the political, conservative, right is using a language that places GLBTQ life as the polar opposite of religion, it is quite possible that the conservative right is subtly—and sometimes not
so subtly—trying to imply that GLBTQ individuals are not truly Americans because they do not conform to the shared beliefs of this country. Furthermore, this rhetoric does not necessarily accurately portray the lived experience of many GLBTQ individuals as seen in Pride parades, the voice, and the book *Gay Religion* (Thumma and Gray 2005).

Lady Gaga voices her message of GLBTQ support in a Christian-inspired language within this context where religious language has often been used negatively against GLBTQ individuals in order to make people *feel* that GLBTQ individuals are not truly real Americans. Her use of a Christian-inspired language should be read as a direct challenge to conservative Americans who do not wish to include GLBTQ Americans fully into society by denying equal legal rights. Furthermore, she draws upon the same strategy of making people *feel* that it is the right and just action to provide equal rights to GLBTQ individuals.

**Lady Gaga’s Christian-Inspired GLBTQ Support**

As I briefly noted in the opening narrative to this chapter, Lady Gaga has used an explicitly Christian-inspired language in her support of her GLBTQ fans. Lady Gaga used the symbol of Jesus in her “The Monster Ball” Tour to make a religiously inspired—and highly emotional—argument against the many discourses in America that currently put homosexuality and religion as polar opposites. Some examples of groups that promote these discourses include the Westboro Baptist Church, Focus on the Family, Rick Santorum, the Catholic Church (which does not directly condemn homosexuality as a sexual orientation, but does condemn homosexual relationships), and Evangelical Christian leader Fred Phelps. By making her statement “Jesus loves everybody” while comparing Jesus to a bisexual man, Lady Gaga clearly entered the locus of religious rhetoric. Furthermore, she continued her rhetorical argument by continuing to yell—
almost scream—about all of the people, groups, and reasons that other people use religious rhetoric against many GLBTQ individuals, making statements such as, “I was taught Jesus loved everybody, not just those who loved the right people or prayed the right way” (paraphrased from “The Monster Ball”).

This section is going to briefly outline the ways that Lady Gaga makes much of her support of GLBTQ individuals in explicit and implicit Christian inspired language. First, I examine “The Monster Ball” tour for its use of Christian imagery. Then, I look at her album Born This Way, focusing on her songs “Born This Way” and “Judas.” Finally, I analyze her use of Christian-inspired language for cultural significance.

“The Monster Ball”

In addition to the extended—and quite explicit—reference to Jesus loving everyone, Lady Gaga incorporates Christian-inspired language into “The Monster’s Ball” in three other major ways. First, she invokes the symbol of the cross on her concert tee-shirts. Second, she reappropriates the common Evangelical Christian phrase “born again.” And third, she uses a language throughout the concert that is reminiscent of a type of messiah. Separately, these three references would not seem particularly meaningful; however, when combined with Gaga’s explicit reference and reappropriation of Jesus as seen in the opening narrative, these symbols take on a greater importance. For the purposes of this thesis, I will only explore the second and third reappropriations.

Lady Gaga reappropriates the phrase “born again”—a phrase associated with Billy Graham, who is a prominent voice in Evangelical politics—from the mostly conservative Evangelical Christian community to be used by her fans in a completely different context. In the Evangelical community, being “born again” references a rebirth that happens when someone
decides to change their life in order to align their life with the religious community that they are members. Since many of these groups are highly conservative, the phrase is often associated with conservative politics that are typically not supportive of LGBTQ rights or individuals.

When Lady Gaga uses the phrase “born again” (which is a play on her single “Born This Way,” her self-proclaimed gay anthem), she uses it strategically referring to her change into the pop music superstar that she is today—her change from Stefani Germanotta to Lady Gaga: she explains that she was “born again” as Lady Gaga. Furthermore, she continues to inform her fans that they too can also be “born again” into the person that they are meant to be, claiming that they can try on different identities and personalities until they find the person that they were truly meant to be. This connection to “born again” and Gaga’s own origin narrative connects this phrase onto her GLBTQ fan’s own coming out stories. In this way, coming out can be seen as being born again into a truer identity.

Gaga uses a language that draws upon messiah ideology in “The Monster Ball.” In the concerts, Gaga discusses how she was bullied and tormented as a youngster, making her self-conscious and insecure—something many of her fans can probably relate to. She claims that she is able to become the person she is because of her fans, that because her fans love and support her, she can be Lady Gaga. And she continues by telling the concert attendees that she plans on doing the same thing for them that evening: she will take on all of the attendee’s fear, insecurities, and disapproval so that she can create a safe-place for her fans where they can truly be themselves. This language makes Gaga a virtual savior for her disenfranchised fans. Lady Gaga’s messiah-like role has great significance within an analysis of her religious-based language, and I will explore this further later in this section.
Christian Language in Lady Gaga’s Music

Lady Gaga also draws on religious language and controversy strongly in the music from her album *Born This Way* (2011). With nine of the seventeen songs referencing God, Jesus, religion, or spirituality in one way or another, more than half of the songs connect to religious language. The songs that do reference religion include “Born This Way,” “Judas,” “Americano,” “Hair,” “Bloody Mary,” “Black Jesus † Amen Fashion,” “Heavy Metal Lover,” “Electric Chapel,” and “Yoü and I.” Within the confines of this thesis, I am going to focus my analysis on “Born This Way” and “Judas.”

“Born This Way” is Lady Gaga’s gay anthem, a song that was becoming famous before it was even released. The song was nearly predestined to be a gay anthem, with Elton John telling Entertainment Weekly, “[“Born This Way”] will completely get rid of Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I Will Survive’ as a gay anthem” (Hawgood 2010) before the song was even released. I can understand John’s sentiments as the song does connect onto the powerful public discourse that debates whether GLBTQ sexualities are inherent or learned behaviors, an issue that has also been thoroughly debated in scholarship (for an introduction to the debate see Eaklor 2008, 8-9 and 227-228). However, the promotion of Gaga’s “Born This Way” over Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” as the new gay anthem reveals two key features of the current GLBTQ identity. First, GLBTQ Americans are no longer willing to only survive despite hardships; rather, they will defiantly express their rights to thrive as equal American citizens. And second, the current GLBTQ rights movement draws on a narrative that places Americans within preexisting discourses of Americanness, such as a civil religious shared belief in a higher power.
Lady Gaga’s message for her GLBTQ fans in “Born This Way” can be summarized in the song’s chorus of:

I’m beautiful in my way
‘Cause God makes no mistakes
I’m on the right track, baby
I was born this way (Lady Gaga 2011)

The song discusses the naturalness of her GLBTQ fans’ identities not only as something that they are born with but also as being within the directive of God. And the reference to God that she makes in this song is primarily the same nonsecretarian God that is often referenced in civil religious discourses—though it could be argued that her reference is more specifically Judeo-Christian due to assumed context in the United States and the opening line of: “It doesn’t matter whether you love him, or capital H-I-M” (2011), detailing a male deity. Either way, Lady Gaga’s strategic use of God within her gay anthem places GLBTQ Americans into a framework that negates the perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity and includes these individuals into discourses that keep religious belief as a key component of American identity.

“Judas” is one of Lady Gaga’s most controversial songs with religious connotations. In the music video for the song, Lady Gaga plays the role of Mary Magdalene riding with Jesus on a motorcycle who is the leader of a biker gang. Both the music video and the song portray Gaga’s dual attraction to both Judas and Jesus, at one point stating:

I wanna love you
But something’s pulling me away from you
Jesus is my virtue
And Judas is the demon I cling to (Lady Gaga 2011)

She has stated that the song is actually about reenvisioning Judas as part of a larger divine plan rather than as a traitor (Hiatt 2011). In this way, Judas was not evil, but simply misunderstood. She can relate to Judas because she feels he has been misunderstood by most people, much like she feels she is misunderstood. “Judas” is a song about how people can often be misunderstood, and then demonized because they have been misunderstood. I believe this song is meant for her fans that she believes are most misunderstood by many Christian churches: GLBTQ people.

**Analysis of Lady Gaga’s Christian Imagery**

The fact that Lady Gaga uses a Christian-inspired language in her support of GLBTQ individuals is not at all surprising considering her own spiritual beliefs. Gaga explained her belief system in an interview with Larry King, when she responded to his question about her thoughts on the church and religion:

I struggle with my feelings about the church in particular but I guess; it’s quite honestly, completely separate isn’t it. Religion and the church are two completely separate things. But in terms of religion, I’m very religious. I was raised Catholic. I believe in Jesus; I believe in God; I’m very spiritual; I pray very much. But at the same time, there is no one religion that doesn’t hate…and for that I think religion is also bogus…I dream of a, and envision, a future where we have a more peaceful religion. (Lady Gaga, quoted in King 2010)

Gaga makes two explicit statements about her personal faith in this quote: first, she comments on her own personal faith in a Christian-based spirituality; and second, she makes a strong
distinction between religion and “the church,” with political and dogmatic teachings. This
distinction between religion and religious institutions—and thus politics and dogmatic
tradition—is in large part due to another part of the quote: Gaga’s comments on no religion not
having “hate.” Gaga is obviously aware of the political dichotomy that is marking religion and
LGBTQ identity as mutually exclusive; however, Gaga has chosen to reclaim and reform her
faith in order to support the political leanings that she has. Furthermore, since Gaga is certainly
aware of the use of the religious rhetoric of hate being against GLBTQ individuals, her use of a
religious rhetoric of love and support can be seen as a direct response and challenge to this
language.

However, Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language should not only be understood
as a rebuttal to conservative Americans who would use religious language to delegitimize
GLBTQ Americans as citizens. Lady Gaga is also known for commonly stating her belief in pop
culture as a type of religion, a sentiment that was made explicit in an interview with Ellen
DeGeneres:

Pop culture is our religion. Through self worship, in terms of your identity, and through
honoring your identity and really fighting for who you are every single day of your life,
down to your core; You can have more faith. And more hope, in life and in the future.
(Lady Gaga quoted in http://retrodancemonster.tumblr.com/post/5012275149/pop-
culture-is-our-religion-through-self-worship, accessed September 23, 2012)

Lady Gaga’s belief in pop culture as a religion adds a layer of complexity to the messiah-like
role that she takes in her concerts that I briefly describer earlier. If pop culture is our religion, is
she to be the new messiah?
The concept of popular culture as a religion is not unique to Lady Gaga. In his book *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (2005), David Chidester explores the religious component of many forms of popular culture. Chidester defines religion broadly as “ways of being a human person in a human place” (2005, vii) and believes that while much of popular culture may not be authentically religious or theological, popular culture does perform real religious work in helping people to negotiate what it means to be a human in a human place. Chidester argues that there are three important components religious work being done: “forming a human community, focusing human desire, and entering into human relations of exchange” (2005, 2). Lady Gaga has certainly drawn from all these of these components as she brings together her community and serves as a voice for many GLBTQ individuals; she serves as a focal point for directing desired political and social changes such as repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell or societal acceptance for marginalized individuals; and she works within a capitalist system of exchange where her image can be bought and sold to her fans.

I argue that Lady Gaga is attempting to use popular culture as the means to create the “more peaceful” religion that she envisions. This could also be part of the reason why she uses a pre-existing religious based language in support of her GLBTQ fans. She wishes to create a space where her fans can be accepted exactly as they are. While her efforts may not be an authentic religion, to use Chidester’s term, she is certainly doing real religious work in that she is helping her GLBTQ fans negotiate what it means to be a human in a human place. Or in this case, she is helping her GLBTQ fans negotiate what it means to be GLBTQ in America. And this negotiation includes challenging the discursive dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity prevalent in narratives of Americanness.
Conclusions

Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language in support of her GLBTQ fans is a complex social issue, with personal implications for the artists as well as larger political implications. I have demonstrated that Lady Gaga’s connection to the GLBTQ community is a deep, thorough connection that is based upon her music, origin story, camp aesthetics, and messages of personal hope—a message of “joyful defiance.” Furthermore, Gaga’s high level of popularity brings hope to some of her GLBTQ fans. As several fans have stated, since GLBTQ rights is obviously her main cause, her rise to fame may point to growing acceptance of many GLBTQ identities in the United States. Gaga solidifies her connection to her gay male fans by drawing on a familiar narrative of divaness in her life and personalities that has historically connected women and gay men. And she continues to do political work in hope of aiding her GLBTQ fans.

Lady Gaga’s message of self-love to her GLBTQ fans in a Christian-inspired language should be understood within two distinct yet overlapping contexts. First, due to the overwhelmingly negative use of religious language against GLBTQ individuals by politically conservative Americans, Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language should be understood as a direct challenge to these conservative Americans. Furthermore, in response to the history of civil religion being used as a means to designate who is really American and who is not, Gaga’s challenge should be seen as a means of reifying GLBTQ Americans as true citizens. Second, Lady Gaga’s use of religious language also connects to her personal beliefs—both that she considers herself a spiritual person and that she believes popular culture can be and is American religion. In this way Gaga is using the already powerful rhetoric of religion to give credence to
her message of reform and change to try and “dream of…and envision, a future where we have a
more peaceful religion” (King 2010). And whether or not Gaga is doing authentic religious
work, she is certainly doing real religious work of helping her GLBTQ fans negotiate what it
means to be GLBTQ in the United States.
CHAPTER 5.
CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has explored the intersection of popular music, religion, GLBTQ identity, and politics in the United States. Whereas much scholarship has detailed the ways that religion and GLBTQ identity can be seen in a dichotomy (Cobb 2006, Eaklor 2008, Foucault 1978), I have instead problematized this dichotomy as revealed through popular music with three case studies: Pride parades, the social grain of musical voices, and Lady Gaga. Furthermore, I have detailed the political implications of polarizing religion and GLBTQ identity in the United States because of religion’s role in creating an American identity, both historically and contemporarily. By exploring these three case studies of popular culture and popular music, I have utilized Santino’s theory that carnivalesque activities often actually becomes the means of creating ritualesque transformations (2011) for the GLBTQ community. Finally, drawing on the concepts of David Chidester in his book Authentic Fakes (2005), I argue that popular music stars like Lady Gaga and other divas—though not necessarily authentically religious or theological in their basis—are providing a real religious experience for the GLBTQ community.

By exploring Pride parades as a ritualesque experience, I am able to show how these events provide the space for personal and societal transformations where GLBTQ identity can be an acceptable and included part of American society. Music is one of the key ways that the Chicago Gay Pride Parade marks the physical space of the parade route as gay-friendly area. The parade utilizes dance music since it is already associated with preexisting safe spaces for GLBTQ individuals, such as gay bars or clubs. Since gay bars parade a physical safe space for many GLBTQ individuals, the music played there, which is most often dance music, becomes sonically associated with the concept of a safe space. The parade then uses this music to create a moving sonic architecture of a safe space to claim areas for the GLBTQ community.
Furthermore, the parade becomes a physical manifestation of the overall goals of the GLBTQ rights movement by (1) focusing on celebrating and accepting a wide range of identities and (2) highlighting the GLBTQ rights movement’s focus on inclusion into the larger social political spheres of the United States. The GLBTQ rights movement’s primary goals and aims are focused on gaining equality through legal means, and it draws upon American Dream narratives of upward mobility to create these transformations. These transformations are made possible through the carnivalesque means such as pop music and drinking.

The musical voices that GLBTQ individuals have strategically identified with for political purposes also provides insights into the relationship between religion and GLBTQ identity. I explore the issue that more often than not, GLBTQ individuals do not get to use their own voices to represent them musically, but rather co-opt musical voices from straight women in a process that I referred to as strategic identification. Strategic identification is when a community identifies with the voice of another community for a strategic, political purpose. I examine the current gay anthems, with their focus on assimilation as well as self-worth, highlighted in the music of Lady Gaga, P!nk, Ke$ha, and Katy Perry. Then, I explored how divas become a great site of identification primarily because of their ability to turn their difference into their power—a trait that GLBTQ individuals can relate to because they are often deemed as different. I look at the often made connection between the African American civil rights movement and the GLBTQ rights movement that is made clear through the strategic identification with black musical practices and artists. Since the popular music voice of the gay community comes extensively from black musical practices, it can be inferred that the “grain” of this musical voice may include aspects of religious ideology due to oral traditions that mark black originating in churches. This identification provides great insight into the discursive
connections being made between the GLBTQ rights and African American civil rights. And because of the origin narratives that often place black musical practices within a tradition of black church, the fact that black musical practices and voices are identified with by GLBTQ individuals further complicates a dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ identity.

Finally, Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language in her support of GLBTQ individuals has strong political implications in American society. Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language (1) complicates a conservative political strategy of using religious language to mark GLBTQ Americans as un-American and (2) enables her to promote her own form of religious ideology through popular culture and music. Just like Dennis Shepard’s speech at his son’s funeral detailed in the introduction to this thesis reveals how religious rhetoric can be just as effective in supporting GLBTQ people as it is in condemning them, Lady Gaga also uses religious rhetoric directly to combat anti-gay sympathies. Also, Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language is one of the means that she attempts to re-envision a new religion. By applying Chidester’s definition of religion being “ways of being a human person in a human place” (2005, vii), Lady Gaga and other divas like herself provide real religious experiences for American GLBTQ individuals by providing a means of being GLBTQ in America through their popular music. To summarize, popular music provides a counter-narrative to the perceived dichotomy between religion and GLBTQ life.

This project begins the groundwork for understanding the religious—both sacral and civil—aspects of popular music for the GLBTQ community; however, there are many issues that still need to be discussed. While discussing popular musics singer’s use of religious narratives with my informants, I found that the religious narratives even spoke to many people who identify as agnostic or non-religious. A more thorough research of non-religious GLBTQ people’s
connections to pop divas who use religious narratives can help further understand the role of religion in GLBTQ rights. Also, though it is clear that Lady Gaga does much work for the GLBTQ community, there are people who view her camp influenced performances as misrepresentative of the GLBTQ community. I suggest expanding upon this research by examining how Lady Gaga’s use of Christian-inspired language is received by mainstream Christian churches. Though this study focused on Christian sacral religion in America, it would be worthwhile to explore how other religious faiths function. Finally, I argue for understanding that the use of religion and religious narratives can be important in supporting the GLBTQ rights movement making progress, just as religion was important for the African American civil rights movement.
REFERENCES


DATE: June 22, 2012

TO: Garrett Spatz
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [287026-4] Music in the Chicago Gay Pride Parade
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: July 1, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: June 30, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exempt review category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Comment: Please note that you have uploaded a fifth consent document that has not been approved by the HSRB. If you would like to include this consent document in your study, please submit a modification request.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 45 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on June 30, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
Research Consent Form

I. Purpose of this study
   • I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University in the field of ethnomusicology within the college of music. This research is being done to complete my thesis that will look at how music is used in the Chicago Gay Pride Parade and how it connects to identity. This study will benefit ethnomusicology by providing a resource of musical identity within a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community event.

II. Procedure
   • You will be asked to answer questions regarding your experiences and memories of the Chicago Gay Pride Parade in a public location of your choice, preferably a coffee house. The interview will be recorded if you agree.
   • You can withdraw from the study at any time and reserve the right to not answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.
   • Participant Requirements
     ○ You must be 18 years of age or older.
     ○ You must have attended the Chicago Gay Pride Parade at least once before

III. Time required
   • You can expect the interview to last between 20-40 minutes. If needed follow up can consist of phone interviews which would last somewhere between 10-30 minutes.

IV. Risks
   • Your risk of participating in this study is no greater than that experienced in normal life. The questions will be connected to musical tastes and questions of identity and will be kept on a personal computer in a safe file with password protection. Only I and my thesis committee will see your information.

V. Participant’s Rights as a subject
   • Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at anytime, decide not to answer any question that you wish, decline to an interview, request to have your information removed from the study at any point, or request that any information not be recorded.
   • Your decision to participate or not will not impact any relationship you may have with Bowling Green State University.
   • Your information will remain confidential unless you tell me in writing that you wish for your name to be used in the thesis for a quote. All information received through interviews and questionnaires will be given either in aggregate or quoted with your name changed.
   • All audio recordings with you will be erased on completion of the thesis.
   • I will be collecting some answers to questions over email. It is for your benefit to know that email is not always 100% secure, so it is possible that someone intercepting your email could have access to your responses.
   • You have the right to have any questions about the study answered by Garrett Spatz and can request a summary or copy of the project.

** Please read both sides of this page and then sign and print your name
• You will be given a copy of the consent form and can receive another copy at any point.
• You can request a copy of the completed thesis if you wish.
• Contact information for me (Garrett Spatz) and thesis advisor (Dr. Katherine Meizel) for any questions regarding the project.

  • Researcher (Garrett Spatz)
    1. gspatz@bgsu.edu
    2. [redacted]

  • Adviser (Dr. Katherine Meizel)
    1. kmeizel@bgsu.edu
    2. [redacted]

• Contact information for the Human Subject Review Board for questions regarding this study or your rights as a research participant.

  • Phone: (419) 372-7716
  • E-mail: hsrb@bgsu.edu

VI. Signature
• Sign if you agree to participate
  ○ Name:___________________ Date:_________________

• Initial if you agree to be recorded
  ○ Yes:_____  No:_______
  ○ X:_____________

• Initial if you want your name to be used in quotes
  ○ Yes:_____  No:_______
  ○ X:_____________