

Lady Gaga: Performer, Persona, and Political Advocate

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

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Lady Gaga: Performer, Persona, and Political Advocate

Lady Gaga is one of today's most interesting and successful musicians. Born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, Lady Gaga has become a leading force in the realm of music and performance. Since 2008, she has released four solo albums, and another with Tony Bennett. She has received much recognition, being nominated for and winning multiple Grammy Awards and MTV Video Music Awards, among many others. Lady Gaga holds the record for the most Twitter followers and was named *Time* magazine's second most influential person of the decade in 2010 (James). How does one person gain so much recognition? She believes she has learned and "mastered the art of fame," getting people to pay attention to what she wants them to ("Lady Gaga on 'Mastering the Art of Fame' "). Perhaps it is partly due her wild costumes and bold behaviors that cause so many people to pay attention to her. However, this examination of Lady Gaga will show that these actions are very much intentional.

For about six years, I have been a big fan of Lady Gaga. I consider myself a "little monster," which is what Lady Gaga calls her fan base. I first saw Lady Gaga at a concert series in 2009 put on by a Los Angeles radio station when I only knew a few of her bigger hits like, "Just Dance" and "Paparazzi." Seeing her that night hooked me. What caught my attention was that she did not just stand there and perform her songs; there was a theatrical nature to her performance that left me so intrigued, and which ultimately led to my fandom. In 2011, with the release of *Born This Way*, I became obsessed. It was the first time an album had been released while I was a fan. Like a lot of her fans, I applauded her in taking a stance in her music. I am very passionate about LGBT rights, so seeing her take a stand both publicly and in her music was inspiring to me. Being unable to afford a ticket to her *Monster Ball Tour*, I was given a copy of

her concert on DVD filmed by HBO, which I watched multiple times. I knew the concert DVD like the back of my hand. My friend and I used to talk about her various costumes, backup dancers, the sets, and other performative aspects that we couldn't get enough of. There was so much packed into one performance. Watching her concert, I saw a confident, sexy woman who empowers and inspires so many people, myself included. I have yet to see her live since 2009, but my fandom is still strong. I stand up for and defend Lady Gaga when people say she's too weird or question my fandom. Many ask me why I like her so much. I usually answer with something along the lines of, "I love what she stands for, she has an amazing voice, and I love her commitment to performance." Even though I have defended her in this way, I have not really thought critically about what she communicates through her eccentric and often shocking performances. Lady Gaga's performances and public appearances are very intriguing to me, which has led me to study her more in depth.

Lady Gaga's elaborate performances are of interest to scholars as well. According to Elyse Graham, "her uses of performance and identity drive some scholars wild." Richard Gray, a professor at Denison University, believes Lady Gaga to be so interesting that he created a book of essays, *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*, which he edited. The essays in his book dig into Lady Gaga's identity, uncovering how she communicates and challenges our perceptions and beliefs. Many of the essays in Gray's book have supplemented my understanding of Lady Gaga and performance. In my pursuit to learn more about Lady Gaga, I will first examine the idea of persona and how Lady Gaga uses various personae, each of which resonate with different meanings. I will then move on to discuss the idea of performance art and performance offstage. Then, I will attempt to show the constitutive nature in Lady Gaga's performances. Lastly, I will briefly overview Lady Gaga's activism for LGBT rights and evaluate how well she represents

the LGBT community in the media. She exemplifies how performance is a powerful method of communication that contributes to how we understand our world. In studying these topics, I hope to have a clearer understanding about performance and how artists like Lady Gaga shape and influence our perceptions about the world that surrounds us.

Lady Gaga's Personae

Lady Gaga, though it may seem obvious, is a woman who wears many different hats (both literally and figuratively). In both her on- and off- stage performances, she plays many roles and creates different personae. In an interview with Anderson Cooper, he states to her, “People obviously think that you're not being who you are because you are wearing a lot of makeup and always, you know, presenting yourself in a different way” (“Lady Gaga on ‘Mastering the Art of Fame’ ”). When he says, “presenting yourself in a different way,” Cooper is referring to Lady Gaga’s many different personae. Lady Gaga uses multiple performative elements in order to create these personae. The costumes, hair, make-up, and many performance choices she makes contribute to a single persona. What she communicates through each persona is also different and has a specific purpose.

The idea of persona is important to consider when studying performance and communication. For Philip Auslander, the author of *Performing Glam Rock* and a professor of Literature, Communication and Culture, the concept of persona was “central to [his] understanding of performance analysis” (4). Auslander believes performers are consisted of three layers: the real person, the persona, and the character. He defines persona as “the performer’s self-presentation” (4). These three layers are “active simultaneously” (4). We, as communicators, take on different roles daily and communicate in different ways for each individual role. The

same applies to persona. To Carl Jung, the famous psychologist, persona is, “a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual” (Jung 192). According to Charlotte Lee and Timothy Gura, authors of *Oral Interpretation*, “the [persona] may closely resemble the author in thought and attitude, but more often the persona will differ significantly from the author” (28). Lee and Gura bring up this point in order to show that the sense of self is not entirely lost in a persona. In the case of Lady Gaga, use of personae is reflective of herself, not concealing herself. Lady Gaga’s various personae, then exemplify these point very well.

It is important to remember that the performer “Lady Gaga” is a persona created and used by Stefani Germanotta. Lady Gaga is her main, over-arching persona above all other personae she has created. Some believe that, “she throws herself so completely into her outlandish costumes and performances, her outfits have become as much a part of her as her vital organs” (“Lady Gaga Confused by Personae”). Lady Gaga has even said, “The lines for myself have become so blurred now, I know not the difference between a moment of performance and a moment of honesty” (“Lady Gaga Confused by Personae”). But has the Gaga persona taken over completely? It may seem so. Do we ever see the raw, real, uncovered Stefani? It is hard to say. Lady Gaga is so often in the public eye, that we really cannot answer these questions, but we have to assume that Germanotta’s background has influenced her Lady Gaga persona. In Auslander’s terms, these are the real person and persona layers. One does not completely conceal their true nature or lose a sense of self while performing a certain persona. The layers are interrelated and help to inform each other. The sense of self has a major influence on what dictates a persona.

So, what is the Gaga persona? Lady Gaga made this persona for her performances and for aesthetic appeal to audiences. The creation of such a persona is made in order to convey certain values or ideas to audiences. According to Heather Duerre Humann, a professor at the University of Alabama, “the adoption of the stage persona ‘Lady Gaga’ is very much a deliberate creation/construction of Germonatta’s, one that may have personal dimensions, but that also has a specific artistic end” (Humann 76). Characteristics that are easily recognized about Lady Gaga include: confident, sexy, avant garde, bold, fearless, unpredictable, and versatile. Physically, Lady Gaga’s persona is well known for her blonde hair, elaborate make up, and eccentric and often provocative costumes. Another characteristic of the Lady Gaga persona is that she is “the archetypal hyper-sexualized, hyper-colorful woman,” which Humann believes to be Lady Gaga performing multiple genders (76). Her costumes often reflect this hyper-sexualized nature of her persona. In her concerts, Lady Gaga speaks about how she was bullied in school and how she struggled with body image issues, which could have led her to form such a confident and sexualized persona. The adoption of this persona shows that Lady Gaga is happy with who she has become and embraces her weirdness. The confidence she carries as Lady Gaga illustrates that she has accepted herself. She exudes confidence in every way possible on- and off- stage, yet stays humble about her stardom. This single persona has allowed her to transform and develop other personae, or her “various stage, screen, and print incarnations,” as Humann puts it (76). Lady Gaga believes there are no limits to what she can accomplish with performance. She feels the same about her personae, saying “the power of transformation is endless” (“Lady Gaga Confused by Personae”). Just in the course of the *Monster Ball Tour* concert, audiences see Lady Gaga transform in costume and character about twelve times.

One of the most studied personae of Lady Gaga, is Jo Calderone. Humann studies the “Jo Calderone” persona in her essay, “What a Drag: Lady Gaga, Jo Calderone, and the Politics of Representation,” highlighting how this persona is a way for us to challenge the way we look at gender. The “Jo Calderone” persona is a male persona Lady Gaga created in 2010. With this persona, Lady Gaga embodies a male completely. She wears wig and makeup to highlight more masculine features. Her physicality is transformed from female to male in her posture and movement. The “Jo Calderone” persona appears in the music video of Lady Gaga’s single, “You and I,” but he made his first appearance and gained popularity in the media at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards. This new persona left everyone asking why Lady Gaga chose to act and dress in this way. She wrote a column in *V Magazine* about the creation of this persona, saying “in a culture that attempts to quantify beauty with a visual paradigm and almost mathematical standard, how can we fuck with the malleable minds of onlookers and shift the world’s perspective on what’s beautiful? I asked myself this question. And the answer? Drag” (Germonatta). This provides evidence that Lady Gaga makes deliberate choices when creating her various personae. She does not dress up and behave a certain way simply for attention; she thinks through these choices wanting to communicate something specific and direct viewers’ attention to certain issues in society.

There is a lot communicated through taking on the “Jo Calderone” persona. Humann writes, “by adopting the male ‘Jo Calderone’ persona, Lady Gaga accomplishes at least two ends: she forces many people to re-think their assumptions about gender and desire at the same time as she pushed her ability to transform and shift her identity at will to a whole new level” (Humann 84). In her essay, Humann discusses the idea of performing gender, borrowing and referring to Judith Butler. Humann argues that through the “Jo Calderone” persona and drag

performance, Lady Gaga is challenging gender binaries and suggesting that gender choices are arbitrary (Humann 76-79). This persona is giving attention to and causing awareness of the issues that surround gender and sexuality. By performing in this persona, Lady Gaga is able to expand her hyper-sexualized nature. Being a female, embodying a male, she can embrace both the masculine and feminine. Drag allows the performer to be in the unique position of performing the fluid spectrum of gender, showing that it is not simply one or the other. Through the “Jo Calderone” persona, she becomes a voice to the many people “who do not readily fit into the traditional, prescribed categories of man and woman” (Humann 80). Many of Lady Gaga’s actions are political in nature and shed light on such issues. She does this in obvious and subtler ways, which will be discussed later in this essay.

Performance Art

One of Lady Gaga’s most unique characteristics as a performer is her ability to make performance transcend the stage. Even when she is not onstage, Lady Gaga commits to performance. She performs onstage, in music videos, and in all other public appearances. Not many other performance artists do this to the extent that she does, but Auslander notes, “glam rockers like Bowie and Quatro consistently extended their onstage persona to public venues offstage” (6). Performance is a part of our everyday behavior, and helps to inform how we understand communication (Pelias and Shaffer 5). As communicators, we perform different roles we play and use different scripts in our everyday lives (4). To an extent, we are always performing in some way; performance is fundamental to humans, who are always communicating (6). Gray writes that, “all human forms of expression—religious, artistic, physical—which form the actions of humanity each consist of either great or small

performances” (9). Lady Gaga takes this idea to a whole other level. Performance is indeed fundamental to Lady Gaga. As Gray writes, “Lady Gaga *is* performance. Whether in public appearances, in concert, or in her music videos, Gaga’s performances examine the self ‘reflected, challenged, codified, cracked up, over baked and served up’” (8). It may seem as though Lady Gaga never stops performing. “Her over-the-top artificiality of her costumes seldom distinguishes between on- and off-stage clothing or private and star persona” (Horn 89). Lady Gaga’s creative director and choreographer, Laurieann Gibson, tells MTV News that part of Lady Gaga being a performance artist is the “idea that the performance never ends for her” (Vena, “Why Did Lady Gaga Go To VMAs”). This idea is easily recognized when thinking about any public appearances she makes. She is always “in character” to put it in theatrical terms.

The idea that she never stops performing is evident in a book by photographer Terry Richardson, who toured with Lady Gaga for ten months in 2010 and 2011, which included the final performances of her *Monster Ball Tour*. Lady Gaga told MTV News, “I didn’t hold anything back from Terry...he was with me every minute, every moment. It’s completely unfiltered. He has photographs of me waking up in the morning, brushing my teeth, in the bathroom, in the bathtub, the shower. . .nothing is staged” (Montgomery). Richardson’s book shows Lady Gaga in another dimension—the off-stage, behind the scenes version of Lady Gaga. Recording both on- and off- stage moments, this photo book shows how Lady Gaga’s performances transcend the stage. Not so surprisingly, performance appears in every part of her life. Avant-garde fashion, wigs, and makeup are all present. It looks like every day of her life is filled with eccentricity and adventure. Richardson captures what are simple moments to most people, such as Lady Gaga eating spaghetti or re-dying her hair, but these moments appear to be

more a of spectacle (Richardson). What this book really shows is Lady Gaga's commitment to her art and persona. She treats everyday as a performance, which makes simple moments more exaggerated and special.

Red carpet appearances are other moments when she continues the performance off the stage. She rarely simply shows up in a simple gown, like most stars do. She takes on an entire persona, wears elaborate costumes, hair, and makeup, and performs her way through these moments. It is true that red carpet moments are considered performances for everyone involved because of their role in that scenario, the scripts they use, and the public image they wish to amplify; but again, Lady Gaga elevates this idea, perhaps even shining critical light on the red carpet performance overall, by deliberately making performance choices regarding persona and character, and thinking through how she wants audiences to perceive these choices. Aligning with what was said about persona, these off stage performance moments have intention and meaning, whether people understand it or not. She pushes people to start thinking. For instance, her famous appearance at the MTV VMAs wearing a meat dress was commentary on Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT). Her appearance to the 2011 Grammy Awards being carried in a giant egg is another example of how her performance is not limited the stage. Both of these appearances are examples showing that Lady Gaga uses her body as art and performs in unconventional ways. Although some of her appearances and outfits might be shocking, they speak volumes to the kind of performer she is.

Because Lady Gaga is sometimes seen as unconventional and pushes the limits of performance, many are inclined to call her a performance artist. In Richard Gray's book, he writes, "Gaga is a performance artist to be noticed" (7). Performance art goes beyond the traditional notions of art and performance. In Pelias and Shafer's text, they describe performance

art as being “within the traditions of the avant-garde,” and refer to it as “an interdisciplinary artwork in which a performer or performers feature themselves in live performance as the focal point of the work” (161). Lady Gaga tells MTV News that her aesthetic consists of pop, performance art, and fashion installation (Vena, “Lady Gaga Plans”). With her eccentric costumes and unexpected ways of presenting herself, Lady Gaga takes herself and her body as the object or site of narrative and feeling (Auslander 4). The very act of coming to an awards show “incubating” in a giant egg, refusing to come out for interviews is artistic and creates meaning. When she finally emerged from the egg onstage at the 2011 Grammy Awards to perform her new song, “Born This Way”, her appearance was shocking. She looked almost alien-like with pointed horns on her face and shoulders while dressed in a flesh colored top and skirt. Appearances like this are exactly what give Lady Gaga a reputation as a performance artist. This is what puts her at the forefront of the performance world. Gray states on the very first page of his book, “Lady Gaga is a performance artist *par excellence* who pushes performance to its very limits” (3). This reputation is what causes audiences to notice her and is why scholars are inspired to explore the meanings she creates through performance.

Performance as Constitutive

As theorized by Elizabeth Bell, one of the three major elements of performance is that it is constitutive (19). By this she means, performance generates something and it is creative in nature. She writes, “when something is ‘constituted,’ it is established, created, given form” (19). This holds true for all the performances of Lady Gaga. There are also what Bell calls “constitutive components” that are the parts that contribute to the creation. Lady Gaga’s performances are constitutive on many levels with various constitutive components. Performance

is central to Lady Gaga and in many ways has created her identity and persona. Through performance, she creates an experience for her audiences. Performance also has enabled Lady Gaga to create a media representation for the LGBT community. These constitutive levels will be examined in the following section.

Even though persona was discussed above, it is important to note that Lady Gaga's creation of persona occurred through performance. Bell writes that performance can create one's identity (19). Performance is indeed fundamental to Lady Gaga. Her whole identity as Lady Gaga is created through performance. She did not start as the blonde, costume-wearing, pop superstar. In fact, she started performing as without her stage name in small New York bars with black hair and far less eccentric costumes. Eventually, after gaining some prominence and being recognized by producers, she started to develop her onstage persona and gained her stage name. With influences like avant garde fashion, burlesque, glam rock and other musical influences, Stefani Germanotta transformed into Lady Gaga. These are just some of the constitutive components that helped her establish this identity. Every choice she makes as a performer, such as costumes, makeup, choreography and other uses of body, and every word she says or sings, are constitutive elements to the creation of the Lady Gaga persona.

Lady Gaga's whole persona and identity are constitutive components to a bigger picture. Through performance, Lady Gaga generates experiences for her audiences. Borrowing from Richard Bauman, Bell writes that performance is an enhanced experience distinct from ordinary life (33). Expanding on this idea, Gray writes, "performances tended to occur in a liminal space of heightened intensity separate from routine life, much like a dramatic theatre performance" (9). When fans go to see Lady Gaga in concert, they expect this enhanced experience. What exactly is this experience she creates? At the very basic level, going to see live music performed in a

concert arena is part of the heightened atmosphere. But the lights, screens, and sets that change throughout the entire show are all theatrical elements that create this experience.

As seen in her *Monster Ball Tour*, the concert follows a story and journey that eventually takes Lady Gaga and her audience to the Monster Ball. The songs are interposed through the journey according to theme. The story starts with Lady Gaga going through New York City when her car breaks down. She gets on the subway while performing “Poker Face” and takes it to the “glitter way.” As she walks down the glitter way, she encounters an angel who starts a twister, made of multiple screens, taking Lady Gaga high into the sky, dropping her off in a strange, unknown forest. Lady Gaga, just attacked by monsters in the forest, is then revealed to be covered in her own blood as she sings “Monster” and “Alejandro.” As she makes it through the forest with her friends, they get scared leaving Lady Gaga alone. An even bigger monster, which resembles an octopus or anglerfish, comes onstage for Lady Gaga to fight off with her song “Paparazzi.” She kills what she calls “The Fame Monster,” also the name of her second album, and can make her way to the Monster Ball. Once there, it is a celebration where she performs two of her biggest hits, “Bad Romance” and “Born This Way.” The creation of this journey helps create the heightened experience for audiences. The elements from this story are exaggerated and do not happen in everyday life. The story enhances the overall concert going experience.

There are elements throughout the show, which refer to many pop-culture phenomena. In her essay, “Follow the Glitter Way,” Katrin Horn, states, “Gaga employs both the intertextual references in her show and her work in general” (86). When Lady Gaga tells her audience to “follow this glitter way” to make it to the Monster Ball, she is referring to *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy must “follow the yellow brick road” to make it to Oz (Horn 86). During the entire

journey to the Monster Ball, many of the story's elements are recognizably similar to *The Wizard of Oz*, such as the glitter way, the twister, and the angel (which could resemble Glinda, the good witch). Horn goes on, explaining, "*The Monster Ball Tour* develops into a distorted *Wizard of Oz* tribute. Distorted, because the destination is not Auntie Em's farmhouse or another stand-in for a traditional home, but rather the Monster Ball, which is closer to the freak populated Emerald City than Kansas" (91).

Pelias and Shafer state that stories are communal. Stories shape our perceptions and help people understand themselves (46). Quoting and referring to *The Wizard of Oz*, a classic American film, enables the audience to clue into the recognizable themes and moral of the story to aid their understanding of *The Monster Ball*. However,

Where *The Wizard of Oz* aimed for acceptance and inclusion by whatever was deemed to be 'normal,' the story and style of 'The Monster Ball' instead does not look or turn back any kind of traditional home or family and instead head for a place beyond any vision of the normal, where being free in the company of kindred spirits is the goal rather than being accepted by any authorial figure or the heteronormative majority. (Horn 92)

While the morals end up being different, Lady Gaga uses her versions of *The Wizard of Oz*'s story to enhance the audience's overall experience and show them what she values. By using these stories that are common and easily recognized by her audiences, Lady Gaga contributes to this experience she makes. With these stories, audiences connect and engage in her performances, rather than passively watching. This is just one example of how Lady Gaga has paid homage to some of her inspirations. Horn writes that Lady Gaga is doing more than

“turning her pop concerts thematically into an inspirational journey; instead, [she] is building her unique performances on quotations and pop ready-mades in order to establish a pop ancestry, which she at the same time outpaces, and a gendered identity, which she deconstructs at the very moment of its construction” (86). Referring to these various pop-culture phenomena is not only a way for Lady Gaga to connect with audiences, but also a way to show what inspires her.

Lady Gaga: The Advocate

A major part of what Lady Gaga constitutes through performance is a safe place for people to gather who might feel ostracized or unaccepted in some way. A large portion of her fan base identifies as LGBT. She stands up for the marginalized and bullied, and becomes a figure for them to look up to. Lady Gaga is the “Mother Monster.” This self-given title implies that she is there to protect and love her little monsters unconditionally. It implies that they can go to her, most likely through listening to her music, to feel this love and acceptance they are lacking in other parts of their lives. It implies that all her little monsters are a family, one in which also provides love and support to each other. Through performance, Lady Gaga has created this sense of community. *The Monster Ball*'s title even makes reference to an LGBT subculture, in which individuals compete in various drag competitions. These balls likewise “evoke community, kinship, and non-biological family ties of freaks and outsiders” (Horn 89). While going through her Monster Ball journey, Lady Gaga tells anecdotes about her life, and of her struggle with body image and need for acceptance. In doing this, she becomes more relatable to audiences, giving them hope, and a feeling of love and support. Through performance, Lady Gaga establishes herself as an LGBT advocate, and as a matriarchal figure to a family of little monsters, which has led to some activism and media attention.

As stated before, Lady Gaga makes deliberate, careful performance choices that bring attention to certain societal issues. This is one way she shows her activism. After interviewing Lady Gaga, Anderson Cooper and his crew reflect, “Spending time with Lady Gaga, we realized the outfits and transformations are not just attention getting, they’re also attention directing” (“Lady Gaga on ‘Mastering the Art of Fame’ ”). Lady Gaga intentionally chooses to perform in ways that are both attention getting and directing. As previously discussed, her appearance in the famous meat dress was shocking at the MTV VMAs in 2010. The media went wild reporting about this dress, so she definitely received the attention she knew she would get. But why wear a dress made out of raw meat? This is exactly what everyone was buzzing about and how Lady Gaga was able to direct people’s attention to larger issues in our society. Some thought it might be commentary on vegetarianism and the meat industry. But as Lady Gaga explained to Ellen Degeneres days after the VMAs appearance, she intended it to shed light on equality, which was timely because of the vote to repeal the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy was on its way in the coming months. Lady Gaga tells Degeneres in their interview, “it has many interpretations but for me... if we don’t stand up for what we believe in and if we don’t fight for our rights pretty soon we’re going to have as much rights as the meat on our bones.” (“So About Lady Gaga’s Meat Dress”). Even for Lady Gaga, the dress has multiple interpretations as she adds, “Oh, and by the way, I’m not a piece of meat” (“So About Lady Gaga’s Meat Dress”). Even though she intended for the dress to direct attention to the issue of equal rights in our country, Lady Gaga was able to get people thinking beyond their initial shock about what is going on in the world. This is a powerful position for her to be in that really enhances her activism.

Becoming a pop superstar has enabled Lady Gaga to become a public voice in the media for the LGBT community in obvious ways as well. On October 11, 2009, Lady Gaga gave a

speech at the National Equality March in Washington DC, admitting, it was “the single most important moment of [her] career” (*National Equality March Rally: Lady Gaga Speaks*). While this speech was short, she, as a performer, was able to move the crowd and invigorate them, screaming, “Are you listening?!” as the crowd erupted in cheers. In this speech, she demanded full equality for all and vowed not to accept “any misogynistic or homophobic behavior in music lyrics or actions in the music industry” (*National Equality March Rally: Lady Gaga Speaks*). She also said she will continue to fight for equality, which is actually what she did in another speech regarding Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

This speech, which she titled, “The Prime Rib of America,” took place in Portland, Maine, at a rally to repeal the military’s anti-gay policy on September 20, 2010. She tells her listeners that she wrote it herself. It is metaphorical and passionately written. She begins by taking the oath that one must take when enlisting in the military, promising to uphold the Constitution of the United States and to protect all enemies foreign and domestic, but adds, “unless there’s a gay soldier in my unit sir” (*Lady Gaga’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Speech: The Full Transcript*). She discusses many topics, such as homophobia and prejudice applying it to DADT. She states, “I thought equality was non-negotiable” and that we cannot pick and choose what to fight for in our constitution (*Lady Gaga’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Speech: The Full Transcript*). Equality is an issue so important to Lady Gaga. She believes in it whole-heartedly and will continue to fight for it—for herself, her fans, and for everyone. One can recognize the passion in her voice and visibly see her getting upset while giving this speech. These speeches, as well as the various actions she takes in the fight for equality, are powerful in media.

With the release of both the song and album, *Born This Way*, Lady Gaga made major steps in her fight for equality. Referring to the album, Lady Gaga said it was the best work she’d

created and that “the message, the melodies, the direction, the meaning, what it will mean to my fans and what it will mean in my own life—it’s utter liberation” (Gray 6). *Born This Way* “showcases a perspective intended to change the world” (Gray 6). Producing this album was her chance to really show the world through her music that she will fight for what she believes in and stand up for her little monsters. Her, “ability to give voice to others through her art is an integral component of her art as well as part of her political project” (Gray 79).

“Born This Way” refers to the ongoing argument about whether sexual orientation is a genetic or a chosen facet of one’s identity. This argument is used to discuss gay rights issues because LGBT individuals are denied rights because of the belief that they choose to be that way. In our nation’s history, equal rights have been granted to groups based on race and sex because those are genetic, born characteristics. “The song claims that everyone, including homosexuals, are born the way they are, having no other options” (Jang and Lee 118). The song, “Born This Way,” has persuasive effects on the way people view this issue, according to a study by Jang and Lee. They concluded that media priming and agenda setting are contributors to this persuasive effect. Priming and agenda setting are related media theories, which theorize that the exposure to certain media allow for particular concepts to be activated in an individual’s mind, thus influencing an individual’s attitude toward that concept (Jang and Lee 116). Noting the commercial success of the song, Jang and Lee believe that listening to “Born This Way” influences listeners to, “evaluate gay rights policies with a heavier weight on genetic explanations of gay origins” (126). The release of “Born This Way” was a major step in the fight for LGBT equality and it enabled little monsters to come together and be visible in media.

Indeed, Lady Gaga gives the LGBT community a voice in mainstream media. At first glance, gay visibility in media seems like a good thing, but it is important to look deeper and

examine how gays are represented in media. The editor of *Media Queered*, Kevin Barnhurst, argues that visibility contains contradictions (2). These contradictions, or, as he references them, paradoxes, perpetuate heteronormativity and heterosexism in media. Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia are interlinked ideas in which homosexuality is associated as bad, lesser, or unworthy. When the media do not resist these ideas, heteronormativity is perpetuated because, more often than not, gay representation is often stereotypical or continues gay marginalization. The idea that these contradictions exist is important to keep in mind for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of Lady Gaga's activism because she is giving the LGBT community more visibility. Barnhurst writes, "scholars from a variety of disciplines have struggled with the paradoxes in the human condition of visibility and have arrived at similar concepts: *identification* in rhetoric, *contrast* in visual studies . . . and *simultaneous contrast* in psychology" (2).

In evaluating Lady Gaga's activism, these paradoxes can be examined in order to see how she resists heteronormativity in our society. It is first important to note how heteronormativity is supported in media. We live in a very heteronormative society in which the LGBT community is marginalized and thought of as second-class citizens. Heteronormativity functions as a hegemonic ideology in our society. The LGBT community is treated as lesser than heterosexual people because of the way people favor the norms of opposite-sex couples and come to expect everyone to adhere to these norms. Heteronormativity is very much reflected in media. In an article by Jan Fernback and Zizi Papacharissi, they write about the portrayal of homosexuals in media. They discuss the quality of the portrayal of gays in the media and applied the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity. They noted that until the 1990s, there was not a lot of gay representation in the media, and if there was, it was often a negative

portrayal. In the late 1990s, more gay protagonists appeared in TV shows and films, but were portrayed as either “avoiding the political context of gay identity and rights” or “as catalysts for the development of heterosexual characters,” which, “reinforc[ed] gay marginalization” (Fernback and Papacharissi). Second, they use the concepts of symbolic annihilation and the spiral of silence to discuss the quality of the homosexual portrayal in the media stating that homosexuals are represented with misconceptions and “dysfunctional social backgrounds” that continue to marginalize them (Fernback and Papacharissi). In music in particular, heteronormativity is very present. The words “gay” and “fag” are often used in demeaning ways. Women are represented in ways where they must fit into normative gender roles. Heteronormativity is still the main perspective of the wide majority of people, which is still observed in today’s media. This is why Barnhurst recognizes such paradoxes in gay visibility in the media.

It is interesting to note a section of Barnhurst’s book is called “Monsters No More,” which is contrasting to Lady Gaga who embraces the monster identity. These are two points of view that have different implications for heteronormativity. Lady Gaga does not intend for “monster” to have a negative connotation. Taking on this monster identity is a positive way to reinforce love and acceptance among a community of “monsters” who fully embrace who they are. Barnhurst says “Monster No More” because he is hopeful that the LGBT community will be represented in a more realistic way. Either perspective of embracing the monster identity or wanting to be rid of it can be useful tactics in LGBT representation to resist heteronormativity.

From a critical point of view, Lady Gaga represents the LGBT community while resisting notions of heteronormativity without the presence of paradox. According to John d’Emilio, “the goal has never, in fact, simply been visibility [in media], but rather a particular kind of visibility”

(25). Lady Gaga plays a major role in perpetuating the positive visibility of LGBT in our society, the kind of visibility where sexual orientation does not matter; it is the type of person you are. Lady Gaga does not make the simultaneous contrast that many media representations of gays do. In other words, she does not create any sort of contrast between gay and straight; she simply focuses on the people. She does not place gay people in a straight world like many media representations do. To Lady Gaga, differences should be celebrated and embraced, but should not have major significance on how we treat one another. By not contrasting or pointing out the differences in sexual preference, Lady Gaga makes everyone equal. Queer and media studies show differences between heterosexual and homosexual are still present. If we place less significance on these differences and on sexual orientation, people could resist heteronormative beliefs and the gay community would be better represented in the media. Gay representation in media is improving with Lady Gaga, whose underlying purpose is to preach love and acceptance.

Conclusion

Lady Gaga is the epitome of a powerful performer. She, at the forefront of the music and performance world, pushes the very limits of what it means to be a performer. My research has only strengthened my fandom. She certainly inspires me more now that I know what makes her Lady Gaga. What she does is far more complex and purposeful than I ever thought it is. Everything she does, onstage, in videos, in public appearances, is well thought out and intended to communicate something to her audiences. With her various personae, Lady Gaga is constantly transforming to communicate her own values about gender and societal issues. Lady Gaga does not simply do things to shock people. Her personae are created with purpose and cause people to perceive her in a certain way. She uses personae both onstage and in her offstage life.

Performance never truly ends for her when she is offstage, which is one reason why she is recognized as a performance artist. I truly love how she pushes the limits of performance. This reputation is what separates her from many other artists today. There is certainly no one else in today's popular culture that is like her. When someone claims that Lady Gaga is too crazy or weird, I can now defend her better than before because I know how well-thought out her actions are. Many artists do not go to the length she does in order to create such special experiences for audience members. Lady Gaga's audiences are very important to her. Her advocacy work and the release of *Born This Way* show that her fans and LGBT related issues are close to her heart. When Richard Gray writes, "Lady Gaga *is* performance," he is really telling his readers what a powerful performer she is. Her ability to make us think and feel certain ways is evident in her work. While I watched the videos of her giving speeches at the National Equality March and against DADT, I would get goose bumps as she spoke. The first time I watched the music video for the song, "Yoü and I," I cried in amazement at what I has just watched. Her ability to move an audience and make them feel something is truly incredible. Lady Gaga is incredible.

Taking in all the information presented in this examination, we see that there is more than meets the eye in Lady Gaga's performances. The complexity of her entire identity should now be recognized. There is intent behind all of her performance choices. Looking critically at Lady Gaga has shown me the depth of performance and communication. All performance choices communicate more than they may at first appear to. Viewing performance in this way has given me a fresh perspective on communication. Performance can move us in ways that other forms of communication cannot. It moves us to feel and think about things in ways we would not have otherwise. It allows us to be empathetic individuals, who share feelings and can view things from a new perspective. Looking at Lady Gaga through a critical lens shows us how she uncovers

societal issues providing a fresh outlook on such discourses. Just as she pushes the limits of performance as a performance artist, Lady Gaga pushes her audiences to view issues in new ways. Studying Lady Gaga has pushed me personally to look beyond the traditional views of both performance and communication to see their limitless potentiality. Lady Gaga will continue to inspire and change the world through the power of performance.

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