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Lady Gaga: Performing Monstrosity as a Cultural Revolution

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LADY GAGA: PERFORMING MONSTROSITY AS A CULTURAL REVOLUTION

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This thesis examines Lady Gaga through the lens of Jeffrey Cohen’s monster theory and establishes that she is more than just a pop diva. Pairing Lady Gaga with another cultural icon, the monster, allows for an in depth analysis of her career that supersedes the cacophony of fandom that typically surrounds her. By interrogating a selection of music videos, live performances, and lyrics from her three top grossing albums (*The Fame, The Fame Monster, and Born This Way*), a clear pattern begins to emerge. Lady Gaga celebrates stigmatized identities by glorying their monstrosity; she transgresses cultural boundaries by reconstructing her body to appear more monstrous, and uses her alluring feminine flesh to attract her viewers. With her pop performance art, her philanthropic proclivities, and her position at the helm of pop culture, Lady Gaga has established herself as a politically progressive artist capable of disrupting a suffocating cultural system.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of Purpose:

Lady Gaga emerged onto the pop culture scene in 2008 with her debut album, *The Fame*. Her first hit single, “Just Dance,” topped charts in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The second song she released from the album, “Poker Face,” wound up with three Grammy nominations and won in the category of Best Dance Recording. Since this debut album, Lady Gaga has catapulted into extreme stardom. For the past four years she has maintained a position at the helm of pop culture bolstered by two more albums, *The Fame Monster* and *Born This Way*, and performed two concert tours: The Fame Ball Tour and The Monster Ball Tour.

As a prominent cultural phenomenon, Lady Gaga deserves critical attention beyond the overwhelming cacophony of fandom that surrounds her. Currently there are very few academic studies of Lady Gaga, and none in the field of theatre studies. With this Master’s Thesis I will begin the process of integrating her into the world of theatre studies. I will do this by considering Lady Gaga in relation to another cultural icon: the monster. Using Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) as a platform, I will construct a discourse on monstrosity and Lady Gaga that will attempt to prove that she is more than just a pop diva; she is a progressive artist who is capable of disrupting suffocating cultural boundaries. For this project I will utilize two different types of sources: literature on monsters, monster theory, and popular culture; and information about Lady Gaga, her work, and its reception.

Literary Review:

Since her emergence onto the pop culture scene, Lady Gaga has been the subject of countless magazine articles, blog entries, and television segments. The people who write about
her and interview her usually refrain from analyzing her work and simply sing its praise. They admire her fabulous outfits, her witty song lyrics, and her seductive music videos. Occasionally biographical information about Lady Gaga surfaces amidst this fandom, but in general paeans of praise surround her in the media. Reputable magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair* provide useful commentary; they both praise and analyze her work. Brian Hiatt, a journalist who writes for *Rolling Stone*, asks pointed questions and makes astute observations in his article “New York Doll” (2011). The information in his article qualifies as non-scholarly but relevant commentary. Hiatt provides Lady Gaga with a platform upon which to reflect on her own work. This type of resource will help me to show how Lady Gaga the pop phenomenon is also Lady Gaga the progenitor of Mother Monster (the most recent monster she has created to accompany *Born This Way*).

A handful of books on Lady Gaga exist, but most are glorifications of the star written by fans. Maureen Callahan’s *Poker Face: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga* (2010), by contrast, takes a more critical look at Gaga’s ascent to fame. Callahan uses a collection of interviews to point out the contradictions in what she refers to as Gaga’s “creation myth.” Unlike the other biographical sources on Lady Gaga, Callahan provides her reader with an index and a short bibliography at the end of her book. Because of its clarity and apparently unbiased perspective I will use Callahan’s text as the chief source of biographical information about Lady Gaga.

In 2012, Richard Gray, an associate professor of French at Carson-Newman College, will publish a collection of essays that he has edited and titled *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*. Currently, most academic commentary on Lady Gaga can be found online. Since Lady Gaga produces work at such a high frequency it is difficult for scholars engaged in the slow process of print publishing to keep up with her. In order to bypass this system, Meaghan Vicks (a
doctoral student studying Comparative Literature at CU Boulder) and Kate Durban started an online journal in March 2011 called *Gaga Stigmata: Critical Writings and Art About Lady Gaga* that publishes up to date scholarly essays. Their online journal serves as the hub of academic analysis available on Lady Gaga. As the editors-in-chief they review submissions and then publish those that pass their screening process. They explain on their website why they have chosen this particular format: “Those who follow Gaga know that she moves at the speed of pop, which is far faster than the speed of critique; therefore, we have chosen the blogger format for now to allow us to keep pace with Gaga.” I will use a variety of essays from their site as I analyze Lady Gaga and her career.

Unlike Lady Gaga, the figure of the monster is surrounded by an array of relevant and scholarly material. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s monster theory takes bits and pieces of queer theory, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory and arranges them to help explain the monster as a cultural construction. The interrogation that unfolds in the collection of essays he published looks at the monster and how its dualistic nature simultaneously inspires fear and attracts desire. For this project I will use Cohen’s theoretical framework as a platform upon which I will engage other writers who investigate monsters and their persistent appearance in our culture. Using their observations I will then explore the intersection where monster theory meets Lady Gaga.

Academics have looked at monsters in historical mythology and modern entertainment. From Montaigne’s essay “Of a Monstrous Child” (1580) to Peter Dendle’s “The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety”(2007), a discourse evolves that continues to raise the question: Why are human beings so fascinated by monsters? None of the sources that I have encountered directly answer this question, but they all seem to agree that the monster (whether it’s a medieval
gargoyle or the glamorous teenage vampire) remains the constant figure of an unsettling cultural identity crisis.

Scott Niall’s *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (2007) and Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) contain intriguing essays with catchy titles and solid scholarship. As I begin to decode Lady Gaga and her monsters it will be incredibly useful to have Niall’s text and essays like “Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture” at my disposal. That particular essay will help me to unpack Lady Gaga’s version of this monstrous character in her music video “Bad Romance.” Cohen’s essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” will create the theoretical backbone of my analysis of Lady Gaga’s work. In order to further support his claims, I will also consult David D. Gilmore’s *Monster: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (2003), a more recent investigation. The anthologies edited by Niall and Cohen both deal with the monster and its cultural significance by adopting a structuralist perspective. In order to clarify Cohen’s theory I have decided to frame his argument by using Foucault’s essay “The Carceral” and Irving Goffman’s “Selections from Stigma.”

Lady Gaga actively engages in the practice of monstrosity, that is, she creates songs and performances that reference and/or have the quality or appearance of a monster. She uses monstrosity to communicate with her fans (little monsters) and as a basis for creating a powerful persona. In her article, “Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theology on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse” that appeared in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* in 2010, Sharon Butcher makes a reference to Lady Gaga that positions this pop artist squarely within a monster theory framework. By connecting to an essay that Stefani Germanotta wrote in 2004 Butcher concludes that “Lady Gaga’s recent Monster Ball Tour presumably took its name
in part, from her on going reflections of the sixteenth-century text that she used in her essay – Michel de Montaigne’s ‘Of a Monstrous Child’” (114). Butcher’s observation ties Lady Gaga to monster theory by identifying her as another investigator probing the question of cultural categorization through a monstrous lens.

**Methodology: Materials**

I will examine the songs and lyrics from Lady Gaga’s albums, *The Fame, The Fame Monster*, and *Born This Way* and the related music videos and live performances. In order to look at Lady Gaga’s work from a live performance angle, I will defer to recorded live events such as the film *Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour: At Madison Square Garden* (2011) and the YouTube clip of her performance at the 2009 Video Music Awards. Instead of interrogating each song and its cinematic or theatrical counterpart, I will focus on the lyrics, music videos, and live performances that engage with a monstrous theme. These include some of her most well-known songs and music videos such as “Paparazzi,” “Bad Romance,” “Born This Way,” and “You and I.”

As a pop artist Lady Gaga constantly transgresses cultural boundaries, but I am only interested in analyzing the moments when she enacts the figure of the monster to do so. Along with her albums and her music videos Gaga created an online series of videos entitled *Transmission Gagavision* that she posted on YouTube. This series will provide insight into her evolving monstrosity and help explain the monstrous theme that emerges as her career develops. A series of three vignettes entitled the “Crevette Films” that aired during her first headlining tour are posted on YouTube and capture Gaga enacting one of her first monstrous characters: Candy Warhol.

**Methodology: Definitions**
In *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (2006), Philip Auslander defines the three identities that pop artists embody as performers: “Following Simon Firth, I see the performer in popular music as defined by three layers: the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer’s self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)” (4). Lady Gaga falls nicely into Auslander’s definition; in her we can see the person, the persona, and the character. Try as she might, the persona of Lady Gaga cannot exist without the person, Stefani Germanotta. Stefani changed her name, her make-up, her hair color, and her wardrobe, but underneath it all she remains a twenty-five year old woman playing a very profitable game of dress-up.

Stefani Germanotta grew up in an affluent home on the Upper West side of New York City equipped with a piano and a loving family. She attended the Covenant of the Sacred Heart where she cultivated her extremely rigorous work ethic and allegedly encountered hostility from her peers who did not value her dramatic fashion sense and personality. She attended New York City University’s Tisch School for the Arts, but soon found this environment too suffocating. In 2005 she abandoned her academic career and immersed herself in a vibrant burlesque scene where she found the freedom to create a new identity and a new sound. She discovered an intriguing persona that she continues to inhabit: Lady Gaga.

Lady Gaga, a pop artist on her way to becoming a pop icon, is an energetic woman who personifies spectacle. She incessantly changes her appearance in order to shock and provoke her audience. She wears wigs, costumes, and dramatic make-up that camouflage her true identity under a calculated veil of glamorous art. Stefani appears to both the media and her close friends as Lady Gaga; she never publicly abandons her persona. In his *Rolling Stone* article “New York Doll” Brian Hiatt observes that, “Gaga is fully Gaga at all times. Onstage or off, she's dressed in
her future-shock style . . . She was born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, but no one has called her that in years” (Hiatt, n. pag.) Through completely banishing her person from the public and the private sphere, Stefani successfully convinces her fans that she is her persona, that she is Lady Gaga.

Lady Gaga gives herself permission to constantly and colorfully cross cultural boundaries by exhibiting her avant-garde costumes and embodying monstrous characters. She uses her live performances and her music videos to showcase these costumes and her monstrous roles. At the 2011 VMA Music Awards she introduced viewers to her male alter ego, Jo Calderone, when she ditched her platinum blonde wig, thick eyeliner, and red lipstick and replaced them with a husky male voice, side burns, and unkempt eyebrows. She does not always play a character, but she certainly uses her body and her eye for fashion to project the ever-changing facade that is Lady Gaga. Stefani creates characters and shocking costumes for Lady Gaga to parade; they attract attention and, for me, demand investigation.

Methodology: Analytical Framework

In Monster Theory: Reading Culture, editor Jeffrey Jerome Cohen lays out seven theses about monsters and their cultural function. He immediately delves into an interrogation of the monster’s physical manifestation in his first thesis, which states that, “The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body” (4). He goes on to describe how the monster functions in society noting that it always escapes, that it resists categorization, and resides at the “Gates of Difference” (5-7). He quickly brings queer studies into his discussion and from this viewpoint constructs a compelling argument that correlates the monster with an unfixed sexual identity. In Chapter 3, “Monsters: A Cultural Obsession,” I lay out the entirety of Cohen’s monster theory.
Using Cohen’s model as a point of inspiration I have created three thesis statements about Lady Gaga and her monstrosity: Lady Gaga celebrates stigmatized identities by glorifying their monstrosity; Lady Gaga transgresses cultural boundaries by reconstructing her body to appear more monstrous; and Lady Gaga sexualizes her monstrosity with her alluring feminine flesh. A thorough description of these thesis statements accompanies my description of Cohen’s monster theory.

**Methodology: Chapter Organization**

My first chapter, “Lady Gaga’s Metamorphosis,” tracks Stefani Germanotta’s transformation into Lady Gaga and provides a detailed explanation of her relationship with her first record label, Island Def Jam, and her current label, Interscope. This chapter also provides biographical information about this star and introduces her family, her impressive work ethic, and her extraordinary talent. With this chapter I create a clear picture of the person behind the persona.

In the subsequent chapter, “Monsters: A Cultural Obsession,” I define the terms “monster,” “monstrous,” and “monstrosity,” explain Cohen’s monster theory and clarify my three thesis statements. But before leaping into my analytical framework, I survey the presence of monsters in popular media. By exploring some of the monsters we encounter in films, television series, and in video games I establish that monsters, like Lady Gaga, are a current cultural obsession.

Using the three thesis statements I justify in Chapter 3, I explore Gaga’s three albums in chronological order and with them uncover the evolution of her monstrosity. In “Robots and Aliens: Gaga’s Initial Forays into Monster-Dom,” I point to specific pieces that she created for *The Fame* and the Fame Ball that hint at her monstrous proclivities. I use her “Paparazzi” music
video, her “Crevette Films,” and her introduction to *Transmission Gagavision* to establish her interest in a monstrous theme.

In “Monsters Within: Gaga Slays the Fame Monster,” I introduce Gaga’s “Manifesto of Little Monsters” and describe the positive message imbedded in “Bad Romance.” I interrogate the monstrous costumes and characters that she creates for her music video, “Bad Romance,” and for the Monster Ball Tour and begin to establish a benevolent motive behind her monstrosity. This chapter uncovers the monsters, from werewolves to zombies, that inspire Lady Gaga’s work.

In the final body chapter, “The Liberating Mother Monster,” I discuss the leading hit single off her final album, “Born This Way.” Using the lyrics as my guide, I uncover Gaga’s philanthropic motives and explain the purpose behind the monstrous character that accompanies this song, the Mother Monster. The majority of the chapter investigates this character and the “Born This Way” music video. It describes the “Manifesto of Mother Monster” and Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation.

My concluding chapter recaps the information communicated in my body chapters and the argument they collectively support. With this chapter I attempt to answer some of the significant questions raised by analysis: Why are we so obsessed with monsters? What does her popularity reflect about our culture? With this thesis I hope not only to offer compelling answers to these questions, but also to justify my assertion that Lady Gaga is more than just a pop singer. She is an influential artist capable of confronting the stifling cultural system that surrounds her and us.
Chapter 2

Lady Gaga’s Metamorphosis

In order to thoroughly analyze Lady Gaga and her monstrous characters we must understand the person that lies behind these artistic facades. This chapter undertakes the task of distilling the available biographical information about Stefani Germanotta into a chronology that charts her transformation into Lady Gaga. It focuses attention on her upbringing, her ambitious nature, and the development of her first album, *The Fame*. The chapter ends with a condensed discussion of her second major record, *The Fame Monster*, and her most recent studio album, *Born This Way*. As her success exploded, Lady Gaga began to engage with the monstrous theme that now colors her career and her artwork. After describing her ascent to fame we will begin to define and investigate this intriguing theme.

Initial Stage: Stefanie Germanotta, aka “the germ”

No single source definitively describes Stefani Germanotta’s transition into Lady Gaga. A few oft-cited facts explain a bit about her upbringing and her personality, but the vast majority of information about her rise to stardom rests on uneasy and often contradictory ground. Lady Gaga (or perhaps the people working for her) has done an amazing job of surrounding herself in a cloud of mystery that continues to remain impenetrable to the public. Two short, low quality clips of her without the outrageous Lady Gaga garb exist, but they do not tell the story of how Stefani Germanotta transformed into Lady Gaga. A handful of biographers have attempted to relay her story, but in the end they raise more questions about Stefani Germanotta and Lady Gaga than they answer. Lady Gaga herself spins certain anecdotes from her past for interviews, but it is difficult to discern whether her tales are grounded in the truth or are calculated
fabrications that support the persona she embodies for the public. As author Maureen Callahan points out in *Poker Face: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga*, it ultimately does not matter:

The small details Gaga has doled out – she was a waitress, a working musician, a burlesque dancer, a coke addict, a wild young denizen of the Lower East Side – aren’t wholly false, but they’re well chosen ones that bolster her new persona, one that has wholly subsumed the girl formerly known as Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, the girl who today only answers to Lady Gaga. (Callahan 12)

Regardless of the validity of the “facts” she shares with the public, the truth remains that Gaga’s fans seem willing to believe whatever Lady Gaga tells them. With their continued financial support she sustains her career.

Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta was born on March 28, 1986, to an Internet entrepreneur, Joseph Germanotta and his wife Cynthia Germanotta, a stay at home mom. Her sister, Natali was born in 1992 and one year later the family moved into the Pythian apartments in New York City’s Upper West Side. As a young girl living in an extremely affluent home, Stefani attended the Covenant of the Sacred Heart. This prestigious all-girls Catholic school currently costs parents $39,265 a year in tuition (*Covenant of the Sacred Heart*). When Stefani attended the rates were undoubtedly lower, but her presence there certainly explains a lot about her parent’s wealth and the type of childhood she experienced.

Beyond sending their daughter to a private grade school, Cynthia and Joseph Germanotta provided Stefani with private piano lessons. Eager to help their daughter, Joe and Cynthia immediately got involved in making her dream to become a professional musician a reality. Author Maureen Callahan describes them as “helicopter parents” and notes their devotion to their daughter’s career:
Joe would use his business connections to get his teenage daughter auditions with executives in the music industry; her mom, Cynthia would escort the young Stefani to nightclubs, beseeching them to allow her underage daughter to perform; they’d carry her gear, call upon extended family to show up for gigs. (Callahan 21)

With her parents’ help, Stefani began to edge her way into a musical career at a very early age. They provided her with the tools she needed to become a successful recording artist. They boosted her confidence and supported her vision while playing the role of devoted and loving parents.

As Stefani’s fame grew and she became Lady Gaga, she continued to maintain an extremely close relationship with her family. Joe acts as her business partner while Cynthia participates as a co-chair for her Born This Way Foundation. Natali, an aspiring fashion designer, still calls her Stefi and Gaga uses Natali’s creations in her shows when they fit her theme (FitzSimons n. pag.). The one member of her family that Gaga repeatedly references, her Aunt Joanne, is a person she never met, but to whom she feels spiritually connected. Joanne died at the young age of nineteen when her body succumbed to an autoimmune disease, Lupus. Joanne wrote poetry and created art, but did not live to realize her full potential. Gaga published her Aunt’s poetry in the sleeve that accompanied the hard copy of her first album, *The Fame*. In interviews, she tells her fans that her fountain of energy springs from her relationship with Joanne. Gaga believes that she was born with two hearts: her own and her aunt’s. Each night before she goes out on stage, Gaga and her crew pray and then shout out Joanne’s name (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”).
In 2010, MTV produced a documentary about Lady Gaga entitled, *Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside*. The “exclusive” segment consists of Lady Gaga sitting in front of a camera and answering questions from an unseen male interviewer, Davi Russo. During this interview, she explains her introduction to the musical world and her development from a piano player into a singer/songwriter. She asserts that she began to learn to play the piano at age four. She includes odd bits of information about her former piano teachers, claiming that one of them was a stripper who had long fake nails. She explains that before she knew anything about pop music she developed a strong classical background. As a pianist she mastered scores written by Mozart, Bach, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. While learning to play classical pieces, Stefani began to listen to her father’s music collection that featured artists like Bruce Springsteen, The Beatles, and Billy Joel (Callahan 38). In multiple interviews, including this one, she reports that her father purchased for her Bruce Springsteen sheet music, and promised her that as soon as she could play one of Springsteen’s songs he would take out a loan for a grand piano (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”). The music at first looked foreign and provided her with a challenge, but eventually she mastered “Thunder Road” and her father bought her a grand piano.

After being discovered in a clothing boutique at the age of thirteen, Stefani began professionally cultivating her singing voice. According to Gaga, she frequented a boutique not too far from her home and made friends with the theatrical employees who worked there. At some point one of them overheard her singing, and after complimenting her vocal skills, suggested she take voice lessons. This employee happened to be the nephew of Don Lawrence, a famous vocal coach most known for his work in Gospel. Throughout his career, Don has worked with stars like Mick Jagger and Christina Aguilera. Stefani and her mother jumped on the opportunity to connect Stefani with such an important figure. After getting to know the young
artist, Don asked her if she had ever considered becoming a songwriter. Gaga credits him with inspiring her to develop this vital skill (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”).

Stefani tells interviewers that she wrote her first song when she was thirteen years old. She laughs at its title, “To Love Again,” and makes fun of her naïve concepts of such a powerful emotion at such a young age (Callahan 22). Unlike most pop artists, Lady Gaga writes her own songs. She often does this in tandem with other artists, but she develops the majority of her songs’ lyrics, melodies, and titles. Before she became Lady Gaga, Stefani wrote and performed her songs at talent shows and in nightclubs (even while she was in high school). She also participated in the Covenant of the Sacred Heart’s theatre program, playing roles like Miss Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*. Stefani loved the stage, acting, singing, and of course being the center of attention. All told, her time as young woman living in the Pythian apartments with loving parents, a grand piano, and a flourishing drive for the performing arts sounds picturesque.

Writer Johnny Morgan asserts that, “Stefani grew up in a New York palace, was loved like a princess, and had an enchanted childhood” (13). Lady Gaga does not deny that she grew up surrounded by a supportive family, but she does claim that her experience at the Covenant of the Sacred Heart often left her feeling rejected.

**Socially Outcast: The Impetus to Mutation**

Lady Gaga often speaks about being bullied as a teenager. Her mother, a well manicured Italian woman, inspired her to dress-up for school. Lady Gaga shares with her fans via interviews and social media networks (Facebook and Twitter) that her peers did not approve of her look, and that because of their dismissal she felt ostracized and disliked. Thanksgiving 2011, Gaga starred in and directed ABC’s *A Very Gaga Thanksgiving*, a two-hour segment that took place chiefly inside her alma mater. During the special, Gaga performed a selection of songs off her
newest album, *Born This Way*, but without the outrageous costumes, the techno beats, or the outlandish sets. She placed her voice and her piano center stage and shared with her fans the inspiration behind her latest hits. “Hair” reflected the once painful memories she had of being an isolated teenage misfit. Gaga plays the song, but stops a handful of times to share with the camera what she experienced as a student at the Covenant of the Sacred Heart. She uses this time as an opportunity to play with props that adorn the baby grand piano where she sits. A selection of her wigs rest within arm's reach, and by the end of the song she creates a colorful headdress for herself using bobby pins, two wigs, and a hairpiece. By returning to her school with a camera crew and her celebrity, she replaces the once painful memories with a smile dripping subtext. Without saying a word she cleverly asks, who’s laughing now?

This theme of Gaga playing the role of the underdog and emerging as the victor repeats itself in the collection of stories that surround her transition from Stefani Germanotta into Lady Gaga. After she graduated from the Covenant of the Sacred Heart, Stefani attended NYU’s Tisch School of the arts for one full year. While there, Stefani began to form the SG Band, or the Stefani Germanotta Band. This band represented her first attempt to break into the music industry, and her first failure. In order to pursue her career and her new band, Stefani did not want to continue her enrollment at NYU and instead cut a deal with her father. Joe gave her permission to take time away from school, but limited her to one year. If Stefani did not make her break in that time frame she had to return to NYU and her life as a student (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”). Stefani left her esteemed school behind and traded in her clout for a position at the bottom of the musical industry’s food chain. Her family had money, her father had business connections, but she had to find and convince a record producer to give her a chance.

**Rebellion: The Incubator**
Stefani found a small one-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side that cost $1100 a month and her father agreed to pay for the first three months, but after that Stefani had to fend for herself (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”). Even though she had left home to live with her classmates in an NYU dorm, it seems her move into this apartment marks her departure from her family home. She moved sometime in 2005 and relentlessly pursued her task until finally discovering Lady Gaga and the record deal that would propel her to the top of billboard charts across the globe.

The Stefani Germanotta Band ended up recording an EP record thanks to Joe Germanotta’s connection with record producer Joe Vulpis. (An EP is an extended play record that does not have enough tracks on it to qualify as an album.) The EP that the Stefani Germanotta Band recorded circa 2005 was entitled Red and Blue and was re-released in 2009. The songs from the Red and Blue EP sound nothing like the dance driven pop aesthetic that currently defines Lady Gaga’s music. Aware of the limited marketability of the Stefani Germanotta Band, Stefani ventured away from a group driven enterprise and focused on promoting herself as a solo artist. No exact date marks the dissolution of her band, but it occurred shortly after she caught the attention of talent scout, Wendy Starland.

During her time away from NYU, Stefani acted as Irwin Robinson’s intern at Famous Music Publishing (the dates she worked for this employer are unknown). Stefani answered the phone and made coffee runs for Mr. Robinson, and while working here met Wendy Starland. At the time, Wendy Starland worked for Rob Fusari, a record producer on the prowl for young female talent. He asked Wendy to find a promising young artist that he could mold and sell to a record label. He told Wendy he wanted someone who “could be the lead singer of the Strokes” (Callahan qtd. Rob Fusari 25). With her burlesque edge and her shock art style Stefani did not fit
that bill but Starland, having witnessed one of her performances, became convinced that this was the girl Rob Fusari needed to cultivate.

Here, the story of how Stefani transformed into Lady Gaga gets extremely vague and muddled. Maureen Callahan attempts to create an unbiased look at Lady Gaga that frequently points out the inconsistencies in the story that surrounds what she calls her “creation myth.” But even Callahan falls into an odd trap of contradictions as she tries to outline Stefani’s transition into Lady Gaga. Her timeline gets confusing once Stefani meets Wendy Starland. According to Callahan, Stefani met Starland in June of 2006, but Callahan goes on to state that Stefani and Rob Fusari were working on putting together a record together in April of that year (Callahan 25, 37). Stefani could not have met Rob Fusari without Starland’s introduction and thus Callahan’s version of the story loses its credibility. The sequence of events that Callahan proposes suggests that Stefani first caught Starland’s attention, and with Starland’s help convinced Rob Fusari to take her on as a client. Odd inconsistencies like this prevail not only in *Poker Face: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga* but also in other biographical accounts of Lady Gaga’s life.

**Fashion: A Transformative Playground**

Stefani’s physical transformation from the almost disheveled looking nineteen-year-old girl into one of the fashion world’s muses follows a much cleaner path than the one that describes her rise to fame. After she left NYU, Stefani played with her look, wearing extremely revealing and strange outfits. Pants, for example, did not often make an appearance in her wardrobe. She sported long brunette hair, bangs, and heavily tanned skin. Gaga tells her fans that her shocking wardrobe began to emerge even when she attended the Covenant of the Sacred Heart, a very traditional school that enforced a strict uniform code. While interviewing some of her former classmates, Callahan points out that Stefani did not stand in stark opposition to the
other young well-groomed socialites that attended her school. According to one of her former Sacred Heart classmates, “[s]he had a core group of friends who she remains close with to this day. She was a good student and wore her uniform mostly to dress code. She liked boys a lot, but her singing and her passion of the arts was number one for her” (Callahan 15). Stefani had a few ideas of how to change her appearance, but ultimately she relied heavily on imitation to completely disguise her former self.

Gaga began by emulating Lady Starlight and her barely-there outfits that hark back to 1980s and 90s glam rock. From Madonna and Elton John to David Bowie and Dale Bozzio, Lady Gaga has “paid homage” to an exhaustive list of former divas that once ruled the pop culture she now dominates. Some condemn Gaga for what they deem unabashed theft, while others see it as her way of creating a unique pastiche that kindly pays tribute to the men and women who inspire her. Of course, Gaga finds the accusations offensive but monopolizes on the attention it attracts. Callahan points out that: “If there’s one thing that Gaga can’t stand, it’s the idea that she’s aggressively copied someone else’s look. Because she so obviously, inarguably has, her outrage is almost funny” (Callahan 59, original emphasis). Criticizing Gaga for imitation seems a tad ridiculous considering how often most people who thrive in pop culture borrow and modify each other’s artistic creations. At the beginning of her career Gaga did borrow from other artists, but now they look to her for inspiration.

**Deception: The Developing Agent**

Unfortunately, an exact chronology of how Stefani changed from a socialite living on the Upper West Side into a Grammy winning musician does not exist. Bits and pieces of information about her life post 2005 collectively sketch out the path she traveled, but the majority of the details and dates remain inexact. A skeletal view of this chronology exists, but only from the
mouths of the people she knew at that time distilled by reporters, journalists, and authors. Lady Gaga of course plugs information into this timeline, but the “facts” she dishes out about her life as Stefani Germanotta do not always speak the truth. In spite of this lack of dependable information, Lady Gaga's fans willingly gobble up the stories that the journalists, authors, reporters, and Lady Gaga disseminate. Instead of going through the exhausting process of pointing out the litany of confusing or all together missing dates and details, I’m going to guide you through the basic skeleton that most Gaga fans consider their idol’s story.

After Wendy attended one of Stefani’s shows – at this point the future star was still playing with the Stefani Germanotta Band – she immediately phoned Rob Fusari. The story goes that she woke him up and told him that she had not found the girl that he was looking for, but something even better. He got online and visited the website that Stefani had set up to accompany the Stefani Germanotta Band. Unimpressed by the songs from Red and Blue, Fusari questioned Starland’s judgment. Starland and Stefani agreed that the website and the songs did not do her captivating live performance justice, and insisted that he see one of her live shows. Fusari caved and agreed to come see one of Stefani’s shows. He attended one a few weeks later but left immediately and called Starland with a question: “are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?” (qtd. in Callahan 27). For some unexplained reason, Fusari did not completely dismiss Stefani but met with her again in person. The way Callahan describes this second meeting makes it sound like Fusari had never met Stefani before, but maybe the location of her gig did not allow him to get a good enough view of her in order for him to be able to recognize her in the daylight. His initial impression of Stefani remained consistent with his instant dismissal of the Stefani Germanotta Band. According to Callahan,
As Fusari was approaching the bus stop where he’d agreed to pick Stefani up, he saw a small, chunky girl in a pizza place . . . He was afraid the outward appearance reflected inner chaos: that this was a girl with no taste, no vision, no talent. She presented as just another delusional girl with a dream. (Callahan 32)

Ignoring his initial impressions, Fusari allowed Stefani’s meeting to proceed. She played him a song entitled “Hollywood.” According to Fusari, what he heard instantly changed his mind. Wendy Starland contests that even after he heard Stefani again he worried that the amount of work he needed to put into generating a new look and sound for her might not be worth his time and money (Callahan 33). For whatever reason, Fusari took on the risk that Stefani presented, and with his help she began creating a new sound that eventually caught the attention of her current record label, Interscope.

While the dates of their collaboration remain foggy, the product of their work together serves as the backbone that allowed Lady Gaga to gain momentum in the music industry. At some point during her work with Fusari, Stefani took on the title of Lady Gaga. The story of the name's origin follows a few different paths but they all seem to agree that Queen’s song, entitled “Radio Ga Ga,” inspired it. Writer Johnny Morgan asserts that while Stefani was corresponding with Rob Fusari, he sent a text message that autocorrected the word “radio” to “lady” in a text that read “you are Radio Gaga” changing it to “you are Lady Gaga.” According to this version of the story, Stefani fell in love with the name and insisted from that point on that everyone call her Lady Gaga (Morgan 40). Maureen Callahan sides with Wendy Starland and argues that the name originated in a meeting:

Despite the numerous origin stories – Fusari’s claim that it was the result of a misspelled text, Gaga’s claim that it was something Fusari said to her while she
was playing a Queen B-side (“You’re so gaga!” which does not sound like something anyone in a remotely cool profession would ever say) – Starland says the name arrived in a far more typical, pedestrian way: a marketing meeting. (Callahan 55)

Determining the name's exact origin quickly becomes a futile exercise. Lady Gaga clearly does not want the public to know that her name was anything but the product of her destiny; she insists that Lady Gaga represents her authentic self. Of course, people like Rob Fusari do not share her view; instead they see the enigma that surrounds her as a defiant way of refusing them credit. In pursuit not only of receiving credit for discovering her, but also of money promised to him in a contract he signed with Gaga, Rob Fusari filed a $35 million lawsuit against her in March 2010 (Peltz n. pag.). She countersued and by September 2010 they settled the dispute outside of court. The case remained a hot topic for only a short period of time, but the stories that surround the origin of her name continue to proliferate.

With Rob Fusari, Stefani/Lady Gaga recorded three songs that appear on her debut album, *The Fame*: “Paparazzi,” “Beautiful, Dirty, Rich,” and “Brown Eyes.” They recorded two other songs that appear only as bonus tracks on some albums sold to the public: “Again and Again,” and “Disco Heaven.” Together they reinvented her sound by veering towards pop-driven dance compositions. Something that typically gets glossed over in the material available about this period of her life is that the reason Rob Fusari and Wendy Starland steered Gaga towards a more theatrical aesthetic was their belief that she was not attractive enough. Callahan explains their logic: “Fusari and Starland didn’t think she could pull off the girl-at-a-piano thing, because, as Starland explains, not a bit uncharitably, you have to be very, very pretty to do that (think Norah Jones, Fiona Apple, Tori Amos)” (Callahan 38). Stefani did not allow this opinion to
knock her down; instead she embraced the new direction they advised her to pursue. She immediately went to work on losing weight to help take the focus away from her face and place it on her body. Armed with a new tactic, a new sound, and a new look, Gaga took her music and began to promote herself in an attempt to attract a record label.

During this time, Gaga spent her days in Parsippany, New Jersey, at Fusari’s office, and spent her evenings attempting to infiltrate the Lower East Side. At a popular bar called St. Jerome’s, she met a burlesque dancer named Lady Starlight who helped her achieve this goal. Lady Starlight took Lady Gaga under her wing and taught her how to become a riveting performer. The two played the songs that Gaga and Fusari were working on while exploring a collaborative routine which involved dancing to metal music while spinning records. They would sometimes ignite hairspray on stage and if nothing else the two had lots of fun pissing off their audience. With Lady Starlight as her guide, Lady Gaga began to develop an act that she soon adopted, perfected, and claimed as her own. Completing her new gang was DJ Brendan Sullivan who performed at St. Jerome’s. Gaga surrounded herself with the right people during a pivotal point in her ascent to fame. Callahan aptly describes her new group of friends as a clique “formed out of equal parts affinity and necessity: Starland was helping with Fusari and a future record deal; Starlight was giving her a crash course in performance art and Lower East Side hipster-ism; Sullivan was a skilled, popular DJ who could help her with bookings” (Callahan 51).

With these connections, Lady Gaga finally began to get noticed. She also released “Paparazzi” and “Beautiful Dirty Rich” on MySpace in order to secure leverage with record companies. She began to gain enough momentum online to convince producers that she could garner enough of a following to warrant a record deal. By September 2006, L.A. Reid, a producer working for Island Def Jam, signed her to his label.
**Rejection: A Natural Catalyst**

It appeared that Gaga had successfully met her father’s challenge and would not be returning to school but pursue her career as a recording artist. Three short months later after hearing “Disco Heaven” and “Beautiful Dirty Rich”, L.A. Reid severed Gaga’s contract because he began to see her as a liability. Her look still needed work, he did not understand her sound, and as a man interested primarily in profits he no longer saw her as a smart financial investment. Devastated, Gaga retreated to the Upper West Side where she says she cried on her grandmother’s couch. Her grandmother told her, “I’m going to let you cry for the rest of the day and then you have to stop crying and you have to go kick some ass” (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”). Gaga took her grandmother’s advice and devoted herself to performing with Lady Starlight while she continued to vie for a record deal. This is when Gaga claims she dabbled in drugs, go-go dancing, and extremely rebellious and dangerous behavior. Given her drive and ambition, it seems fairly unlikely that she would allow self-destructive antics to get in her way, but her most recent and allegedly biographical video does open with Gaga in a hospital bed recovering from a drug overdose. She appears fearless, famous, and unstoppable, but Lady Gaga monopolizes on her humanity and the sympathy her fight for fame ignites in her fans.

While Gaga explored new performance techniques, Rob Fusari continued to contact his producer colleagues. He finally succeeded in getting Gaga a meeting with Interscope Records after he spoke with Vincent Herbert, a producer who owed him a favor. By now, Joe Germanotta’s deadline had passed, but Gaga refused to give up on recording an album. Gaga wrote a new song for her meeting with Herbert, “The Fame.” After hearing the song, Herbert recognized her talent but did not offer to take her on as a recording artist; instead, she would write songs for other established stars. Like L.A. Reid at Island Def Jam, Herbert and his cohorts
did not trust Gaga’s disheveled look, and according to Callahan, “[u]nless and until that was resolved, she was best kept in the background as a songwriter” (Callahan 102). DJ Brendan Sullivan puts it much more bluntly: “Interscope is a long, long road which actually involves a lot of people thinking she’s great to have around, but not pretty enough to be a pop star” (qtd. in Callahan 102). Gaga accepted her position as a songwriter and moved to California to join her new company. She had to leave Lady Starlight, Wendy Starland, and Brendan Sullivan behind because they no longer provided her with the connections she needed to succeed. She enjoyed her time on the Lower East Side, but she quickly traded that in for a chance to make it big on the West Coast.

During the first few months with Interscope, Gaga endured her role behind the scenes writing songs for artists like Britney Spears and the Pussy Cat Dolls. She used her environment as an asset and began to develop relationships with powerful people in the industry. If she hated working behind the scenes, she certainly did not let it show. Instead, Gaga kept writing songs and developing her sound. After writing a song called “Money Honey” for the Pussy Cat Dolls, Gaga played it for their producer, Akon. Akon, an R&B recording artist and songwriter who worked for the company, immediately abandoned the idea of purchasing “Money Honey” for the Pussy Cat Dolls. When he heard Gaga sing he felt the impulse to sign her as the recording artist. Akon approached the head of Interscope, Jimmy Iovine, for permission to promote Gaga from songwriter to recording artist. Iovine gave Akon permission and with Akon’s support, Gaga began filling out the remainder of the album she had started with Island Def Jam. During this process she ended up collaborating with two other producers: RedOne and Martin Kierszenbaum. Gaga worked for Interscope but her involvement with Akon, RedOne, and Kierszenbaum meant that she was simultaneously signed to four different companies who
profited from her success: Cherry Tree, Streamline, and Konlive. Gaga titled the album *The Fame*, and selected her songs on the basis of this theme. With the help of the producers at Interscope, she wrote eleven more songs to round out the album.

Even with her newfound connections, the process of creating the album did not proceed as smoothly as the star now makes it sound. Interscope rejected song after song, and either tossed the rejects aside or gave them away to other artists (Callahan 110). Gaga had to write a hit song before Interscope would release her album. Gaga had leapt through a series of industrial hoops, but she had to overcome this final challenge before she could unveil the album she had spent two years making. After spending a weekend in New York with Lady Starlight, Gaga returned to the studio and met with RedOne. Legend has it that she got off the plane (still intoxicated from an evening of partying) and rolled into the studio where suddenly her hit song just came tumbling out of her. The song was called “Just Dance” and after Iovine heard it he told Gaga, “You did it, you did everything that we asked you to do. We believed in you and we didn’t know why, and now we know why” (qtd. in Callahan 112). “Just Dance” became the first hit single on *The Fame*.

**Maturation: A Grueling Process**

Gaga wrote the hit song but her newfound success with Iovine did not produce instant fame. “Just Dance” was released as a single in the United States on April 8, 2008, but it did not reach the top of Billboard charts until January 2009 (Callahan 25). After releasing her song, Gaga and Interscope went to work on developing her as an artist and promoting *The Fame*. Their plan was to infiltrate an influential niche audience with a steady flow of disposable income: young gay party boys (Callahan 119). Interscope hired two PR firms in an attempt to book her at the right parties and clubs while Gaga worked on bolstering her online fan base. Gaga had
accumulated a small following via her MySpace and Facebook pages, but she needed a larger audience. Instead of attempting to create this audience, Gaga befriended a man who already had clout with the gay community, gossip blogger Perez Hilton. Hilton began his career by posting tabloid photographs of celebrities accompanied by snarky comments. He became known for generating and sustaining controversial rumors and negative publicity. Aware of his ability to damage a celebrity’s reputation, Gaga decided to preempt his criticism by inviting him into her inner circle. When Hilton likes a celebrity, he uses his blog as a forum for unyielding promotion. Gaga jumped on this opportunity and began inviting Hilton on private dinner and spa dates. She made Hilton feel like he had exclusive and personal access to her, which allowed the two to bond (Callahan 133). Gaga successfully seduced Hilton and thus his followers. On June 8, 2008, his first adoring post went up:

   Yes! Yes! Yes!!! Finally, a new artist that explodes onto the scene in America and embraces pop music, like old school Madonna! Her name is Lady Gaga, and, yes, we’re going gaga for her. *Just Dance* is the lead single off her new album and this shit be our summer anthem!!! You must CLICK HERE to check out the super stylin’ and ferosh video. It’s like Last Night’s Party and The Cobrasnake come to life. The song is sooo damn catchy! (Perez, “Watch & Listen”)

By now, Interscope had hired a director and creative team to shoot Gaga’s first music video. Hilton’s exuberant approval of not only her video but also her music allowed her to gain the momentum she needed to boost her profit margin. To this day, Hilton continues to promote Gaga by posting photos, videos, and comments that sing her praise. He fondly refers to her as either his “wifey” or “Gagaloo” and encourages his followers to watch her videos, attend her concerts, and purchase her music.
In addition to gaining exposure online via Perez Hilton, Gaga began uploading videos to YouTube in a series called *Transmission Gagavision*. She filmed short segments for her fans that tracked her ascent to fame. The first episode begins with an electronic voice reading out a message that simultaneously scrolls across the screen, it reads: “Stardate: 2008. Lady Gaga has been sent to Earth to infiltrate human culture one sequin at time” (Lady Gaga, “Lady Gaga – Transmission”). As this message disappears another one replaces it: “Activate camera probe. Initiate Transmission Gagavision” (Lady Gaga, “Lady Gaga – Transmission”). The remainder of the video is shot in black and white and features Gaga riding in the back of a car and then walking inside what looks like a grocery store. She shares a few random bits of information with the camera like the fact that she moved to California for work and is now on tour. The episode ends and a new message pops up: “Transmission Complete…Next transmission in one week” (Lady Gaga, “Lady Gaga – Transmission”). Thirty-nine other episodes followed this initial one, capturing her rapid rise to more and more fame. The first episode was posted on YouTube on June 24, 2008, and the final installment appeared on March 31, 2009. Beginning in April of 2011, Gaga resumed the episodes and shortened their name, referring to them only as *Gagavision*. Post 2009, *Gagavision* episodes appeared in color and without the formal cyberspace introduction. She used *Transmission Gagavision* to promote *The Fame*. She did the same thing with *Gagavision*, but instead used it to promote her second studio album, *Born This Way*. The entire series remains accessible on YouTube and provides a fascinating view of her early career.

While Gaga networked herself online, Interscope worked with employees from FlyLife and Coalition Media Group (the two PR firms they hired) to secure Gaga the right gigs. Overall, the plan was to make it appear that Gaga was not only active in the gay community but had
sprung from within it (Callahan 119). According to Callahan, the logic behind this choice was that, “if she did break out, she would not only have a committed core of consumers with highly disposable income, but she’d have cred as an outsider artist, despite her highly commercial sound” (Callahan 120). Their plan succeeded and by May 2008, Gaga made her first television appearance on Logo TV, a cable channel targeted towards a gay audience. She performed “Just Dance” for their NewNowNext Awards and made a lasting impression. The video clip of this performance can still be found online; it captures a very dedicated Gaga on the prowl for fame. She struts on the stage flanked by two female back up dancers. She begins and ends her number with a clear sense of purpose, and as the music fades she strikes a pose and freezes there until the camera fades her out of focus. She stares blankly at her audience, and like a well-trained actor, she refuses to break character. This performance exhibits her professionalism and extreme ambition.

With the help of FlyLife, Coalition Media Group, and Perez Hilton, Gaga began promoting her album at gay clubs, parties, and televised events (Callahan 117 - 122). A DJ from Cherry Tree, Space Cowboy, spun records while Gaga sang and danced along with her two female backup dancers. They played a short set with the same choreography and one key prop: Gaga’s disco stick. Gaga’s disco stick looks like a space age scepter made out of chrome, acrylic plastic, and LED lights. Allegedly engineered by employees from NASA, the disco stick made appearance after appearance alongside Gaga and her ensemble.

They kept an extremely grueling schedule while on an international promotion tour that bounced them around Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States. Gaga purportedly got as few as four hours of sleep each night; when she was not performing she was up at the crack of dawn doing interviews at radio stations all day. At this point, Gaga was only 21 years old and
had been away from home for over two years without any substantial down time. Everyone traveling with her was either working for her or working for Interscope. Callahan describes her struggle: “She didn’t want to be average, but it was harder than she’d expected to be out on the road all the time, surrounded by a crew of people who were very nice to her but were nonetheless on the payroll” (Callahan 160). She did not get to go home at the end of the day and relax with a supportive group of people; in fact, she rarely even got a day off. Gaga, ever the hardworking artist, spent what little time she had to herself planning her next move.

Exhaustion: An Inevitable Side Effect

Eventually, the combination of her touring schedule and her homesickness began to take a toll on Gaga’s wellbeing; she began to emotionally and physically deteriorate. She filmed a lot of Transmission Gagavision during this promotion tour, and on screen she appears energetic and happy, but with the camera safely stowed away a very lonely Gaga emerged. During this time, Gaga convinced her road manager’s wife, Angela Ciemny, to become her personal assistant. Gaga soon began to rely on her for constant companionship. According to Angela, the situation got so intense that she, “wound up sleeping with Gaga more often than her own husband . . . there was nothing sexual about it; Gaga couldn’t sleep without someone next to her in bed” (qtd. in Callahan 159). Despite her strong work ethic, Gaga ended up having to cancel a handful of her shows due to sheer exhaustion. Her performance set required a lot of stamina and strength that she could not muster without proper nutrition and rest. When she did become ill, Gaga fought with her managers about not going on stage, but ultimately caved and allowed them to take her to the hospital. Depleted of proper nutrients and electrolytes, she usually just needed intravenous therapy, a solid meal, and a lot of rest. At most, Gaga would take about 12 hours off before jumping back into her hectic routine.
Rather than intervene to alleviate the problem, Interscope kept handing her more projects. While she promoted her album they asked her to begin shooting music videos. They started off with “Just Dance” followed by “Poker Face” and “Paparazzi.” As her fan base grew and *The Fame* began to gain momentum, the budget for these music videos steadily increased. The difference between the “Just Dance” music video and the “Paparazzi” music video certainly announces this change. The “Just Dance” music video appears to take place in a run-down frat house and consists of Gaga and a group of teenagers partying while she gyrates around them. For the video, she attached a bright blue lightening sticker across her face as a tribute to Bowie, but beyond this detail the video looks the cheap work of an amateur director. “Paparazzi,” on the other hand, looks planned, professional, and purposeful. Gaga plays a clear character and the video follows a story line that reaches beyond the parameters of the song’s superficial lyrics. Despite the marked difference between the two, a dedicated Gaga appears in both. She presents herself convincingly and shamelessly allowing her audience to view her extreme ambition and ability.

The combination of Gaga’s unhealthy work ethic and Interscope’s expertise ignited her career. While it seems fairly obvious that she did not ascend to fame on her own, this is the story that most of her fans believe. She appeared to become an overnight sensation, but the truth is that a lot of planning and work went into breaking her into the music industry. Beginning with “Just Dance,” the company strategically released certain tracks in order to continue interest in *The Fame*. Following “Just Dance” they released “Poker Face” then “Eh Eh Nothing Else I Can Say.” As “Just Dance” And “Poker Face” began their ascent up Billboard charts they then released “LoveGame” and “Paparazzi.” Finally they sold “Beautiful Dirty Rich” as a promotional single and within a year the entire album gained positive reviews from both music
fans and critics. By the time the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards rolled around, *The Fame* had received 6 nominations and won in two categories: Best Electronic/Dance Album and Best Dance Recording for “Poker Face.” Not only was Gaga established as an artist within pop culture, she and Interscope had secured her a position at its helm. When asked how they were able to launch her career with such success, an executive at Interscope said, “We threw the building at it” (qtd. in Callahan 153). Interscope certainly gave her more money and more leeway than they had given other artists in the past but they cannot take full credit for her impressive accomplishments.

**Cultivating Autonomy: Lady Gaga Arrives**

Gaga relied on Interscope’s money and expertise to get her started, but she did not just hang on for the ride. Gaga insisted on maintaining control over her identity, her crew, and her live performances. She spent the majority of the money she earned on building more gadgets and costumes for her show. Interscope assigned her a manager, a producer, and back-up dancers but Gaga worked on selecting her own creative entourage. She called this group the Haus of Gaga and assigned them the task of helping her realize her creative visions. Like most aspects of her personal life, Gaga keeps the details of the Haus of Gaga secretive. When asked about the Haus of Gaga, Gaga typically diverges into a rehearsed monologue that compares the Haus of Gaga to Andy Warhol’s Factory, cleverly refusing to divulge any key information about the members of this group.

In the booklet that accompanies the CD version of *The Fame*, Gaga thanks the Haus of Gaga and cites a list of members. This list however reads like a confusing code including only initials and nicknames that contain inconsistent punctuation: “L.G, L.L., M. ‘Dada’ W., M. ‘D’. E, C. ‘C’. D, R. ‘Ninja’, Space Cowboy, S ‘Kamikazee’ M, David ‘Dark’ C., A. ‘The Ornament’
C. L.A.G.” (Lady Gaga, *The Fame*). Deciphering these initials is kind of fun; does Lady Gaga begin by thanking herself? Does L.G. stand for Lady Gaga, or does L.G. stand for Laurie Ann Gibson, the choreographer who allegedly acted as Gaga’s creative director? Or does L.A.G. refer to Laurie Ann Gibson? Why use everyone’s initials? Why make it such a secret? By comparing this list to a list provided by diehard Gaga fans on a Wiki dedicated to Lady Gaga entitled “Gagapedia,” the names and initials start to make sense. Yes, L.G. refers to Lady Gaga, L.A.G. to Laurie Ann Gibson, L.L. to Leah Landon, and M. “Dada” W. to Matthew Williams (“Haus of Gaga”). Space Cowboy appears in episodes of *Transmission Gagavision* and acts as Gaga’s onstage DJ. He tours with her and helps her write songs, but beyond that not much information exists about his function in the Haus of Gaga. But does Gaga really want anyone to know who these people are? It seems like she’s put a lot of effort into making the Haus of Gaga as much of an enigma as Lady Gaga, so why break the mysterious trend? Doesn’t it create exactly the sort of intrigue and fascination that makes her appealing? The millions of people buying her records, creating Wiki pages for her, and attending her concerts certainly seem to thrive on the rush of her tease. They do not know who she is or what she is, but they know that they cannot get enough of her. It appears that the Haus of Gaga represents yet another one of her creations that keeps fans interested and makes her attractively unique.

While Gaga was developing her Haus and promoting her album, Interscope decided to pair her up with the New Kids on the Block. Gaga joined their tour and served as their opening act. Typically opening acts do not receive as much funding or stage time as the headlining artists; they simply appear on stage to warm up the audience or to disguise set changes. Gaga bucked this concept and attempted to mount as much of her show on stage as possible. She filmed a series of short vignettes she calls her “Crevette Films” which were inspired by Andy Warhol and
his pop art. They star Lady Gaga playing a character named Candy Warhol and an unnamed man. They do not look like films but rather like moving pictures that have been edited to appear choppy and robotic. Gaga's computerized voice explains to the man that pop ate her heart. Callahan claims that Gaga hired creative director Ray Woodbury, and that he came up with the idea to produce these vignettes (Callahan 151). However, the fans that create “Gagapedia” contend that Lady Starlight engineered these retro installations (“Crevette Films”). The three vignettes – titled The Heart, The Brain, and The Face – allowed Gaga to grab and keep her audience’s attention. During her opening act for the New Kids on the Block, Gaga insisted on debuting these films.

The New Kids on the Block did not appreciate Gaga’s attempt to steal their spotlight. At the end of their show they played a song that Gaga had written for them (back when she acted only as a songwriter for Interscope). Her manager tried to coordinate a duet on stage with the band, but each night she waited in the wings only to be ignored by the New Kids. Gaga disregarded the slight and continued to push for more time on stage. After the tour ended she had already begun to develop routines for her own tour, but she played the part of the opening act one more time. This time she joined the Pussy Cat Dolls for the European leg of their Domination Tour. By now, audiences recognized both Lady Gaga and her songs; they were often more excited to hear her play than they were to watch the Pussy Cat Dolls. Armed with an ever-growing population of fans, Gaga was ready to headline her own tour, called The Fame Ball Tour.

Gaga did not want to sell tickets to a concert; she wanted to invite guests to a unique evening of entertainment. Her mission with her music and her eccentric presentation was to make pop music high art. In one of the video clips that accompanied her tour, a message scrolls
across a pair of glasses that cover Gaga’s eyes: “Pop Will Never Be Low Brow Again.” Along with the Haus of Gaga she created an elaborate electronic set to bring to life her concept of The Fame. She played her “Crevette Films” and adorned herself with new and exciting outfits that paralleled the robotic persona she played on stage and on screen. While she toured with the New Kids on the Block and The Pussy Cat Dolls, Gaga rehearsed ad nauseum for her Fame Ball and utilized her down time to design these new and exciting creations. Gaga performed the Fame Ball a total of 69 times in the span of six months, beginning first in San Diego at the House of Blues on March 12, 2009, and ending on September 29, 2009 in Washington D.C. at DAR Constitution Hall. During this time, Gaga traveled across the globe visiting over 25 different countries and again faced daunting 18-hour days very reminiscent of her schedule promoting The Fame. By now though, the long hours she had been keeping since the beginning of 2008 were a welcomed challenge. Gaga did not want to sit on her new-found success, she wanted to keep moving.

Despite her exhaustion she kept churning out new work. While on tour she prepared for the MTV’s 2009 Video Music Awards (VMA), a televised award show that gave her a 5-minute slot to perform “Paparazzi.” The show aired on September 13, 2009, two weeks before she ended The Fame Ball Tour. By the fall of 2009, Gaga’s fame had exploded; she’d been on tour and making television appearances on shows like SNL, the Ellen DeGeneres Show, Oprah, and 60 Minutes. She’d been on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine and her album had hit the top of the Billboard charts. With her rising fame in tow, Gaga approached this awards ceremony with a fresh mission: to shock her audience. During her performance, Gaga covered herself in fake blood and had her back-up dancers attach her to a cable that lifted her above the stage so that she could create a powerful death tableau. With this piece, she amplified her song’s lyrics that
exclaim: “I’m your biggest fan/ I’ll follow you until you love me/ Papa- Paparazzi” (“Lady Gaga Paparazzi Live MTV VMA 2009 HD”). Off stage and back in the audience, Gaga wore a vintage Alexander McQueen ensemble that symbolized the death she had enacted. A head to toe see-through red lace garment clung to her body as she approached the stage three more times to receive awards for Best New Artist, Best Special Effects, and Best Art Direction for her work on “Poker Face” and the “Paparazzi” music video. Many cite this event as the moment that Lady Gaga finally arrived.

In my opinion, Lady Gaga arrived the moment Stefani Germanotta decided to give herself over to this persona and the media finally caught on during this televised event. Soon YouTube and online news sources were teeming with splashy comments about her performance – this kind of media attention seems to be a permanent and desired fixture in her life. With The Fame, Gaga became the celebrity she had once envisioned. She accumulated clout, accolades, and fans while she continued to cultivate her art.

And Thus The Monster Rises

Following The Fame, the next major record Gaga released was an EP titled The Fame Monster. Originally Gaga wanted to release another album, but with only 8 new songs she did not have enough material. Instead, she packaged The Fame along with her new pieces and sold them together. The Fame Monster debuted in the United States on November 8, 2009. A little over a month later, Gaga released the Super Deluxe version of The Fame Monster that included a lock of hair from her wig, posters, and a book called the “Book of Gaga.” In the “Book of Gaga” she printed the Manifesto of Little Monsters. Currently this product can only be found online: used copies cost seventy-five dollars and new copies cost upwards of two hundred dollars. With the release of her manifesto, Gaga began referring to her fans as “little monsters.” Soon this
moniker spread and Lady Gaga fans became synonymous with “little monsters.” The eight songs that she generated for *The Fame Monster* were: “Bad Romance,” “Alejandro,” “Monster,” “Speechless,” “Dance in the Dark,” “Telephone,” “So Happy I Could Die,” and “Teeth.” With this EP and the music videos she created for “Bad Romance,” “Alejandro,” and “Telephone,” Gaga continued to explore her monstrous impulses. She abandoned her disco stick and explored an entirely new sound that remained catchy and commercial, but also exuded a raw artistic vision that began to elevate her above the superficiality that defines pop culture. She also began to develop a consistent pattern of production that allowed her to simultaneously write, promote, and tour.

While she promoted *The Fame Monster* and filmed her new music videos, Gaga began designing and planning her second tour: The Monster Ball Tour. Originally she was supposed to co-headline a tour with rapper Kanye West entitled “Fame Kills” but thankfully that ill-fated plan did not come to fruition. The Monster Ball Tour ran from November 27, 2009, to May 6, 2011, and earned 200 million dollars in box office sales. Gaga performed this show 201 times, with 119 performances in North America, 63 in Europe, 15 in Oceana, and 4 in Asia (“The Monster Ball Tour”). In March 2011 HBO released a televised special called “Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball Tour: Madison Square Garden” that gave fans who could not attend the concert a taste of Lady Gaga performing live. The 115-minute long video presented an intimate look at her new designs and choreography that included a full-sized “fame monster.” The one thing that did not appear in this special was the series of new films that she created to play during transitions in her show. In perhaps the most talked about film, “Puke on Gaga,” Gaga partnered with performance artist Millie Brown, a woman who uses her own vomit to create artwork. Millie ingests vibrantly colored milk and then films herself as she regurgitates the liquid
onto white canvases (Dobbins, “Meet Millie Brown”). In a two minute segment reminiscent of the “Crevette Films,” Gaga allows Millie to vomit on her while Gaga stands on a pedestal wearing a flowing white gown (“Puke Film”). This footage edited and interspliced with footage of Gaga eating a heart (allegedly a cow’s heart) creates a powerful statement about beauty, reinvention, and the female body. Gaga creates powerful artwork that hints at a set of core beliefs that shape her career and the persona she plays for her audience.

During her year and a half long tour, Gaga wrote and recorded her second studio album, *Born This Way*. She used her tour to begin promoting the first single off this third album, titled “Born This Way.” Interscope did not release *Born This Way* until May 23, 2011, but they released the “Born This Way” single on February 11, 2011. With almost three months left on her tour Gaga used the stage to explore and advertise her new pieces. Two days later, on February 13, 2011, she performed “Born This Way” at the 53rd annual Grammy awards. She entered the event inside a giant egg created by the Haus of Gaga and refused to emerge until it was time for her to perform. With an entourage of androgynous back-up dancers she stole the show. Exactly two weeks later, on February 27, 2011, the music video for “Born This Way” hit YouTube. With 41 performances left on her tour, Gaga continued to release new singles and music videos off *Born This Way*. Her clever tactics sparked interest and demand for her new album: 1.108 million copies were sold during its first week on the market (“Monsters Rule!”).

Before *Born This Way* was released two other songs were released as singles: “Judas” and “The Edge of Glory.” By May 3, 2011, the music video for “Judas” was uploaded to YouTube. Gaga wrapped up the Monster Ball Tour on May 6 and utilized her time off to complete work on the remaining videos for the album. She released “The Edge of Glory” on June 16, “You and I” on August 16, and finally “Marry the Night” on December 2. With the help
of the Haus she created another set of unique characters and concepts to fill out these videos: the Mother Monster, Yuyi the Mermaid, and Jo Calderone. The monstrous inclinations that she began exploring in *The Fame Monster* become more pronounced in this album and particularly in these videos. Even the sound of the album hints towards a darker gothic aesthetic. In the few clips of *Gagavision* centered on this album Gaga refers to *Born This Way* as a “cultural baptism.” With its religious undertones and dark themes, this album and the creative work that it inspired stands in what appears to be stark opposition to her sequin riddled beginnings. While they may look and even sound like polar opposites, *The Fame/The Fame Monster* and *Born This Way* all revolve around a positive message that Lady Gaga shares with her fans: accept and love yourself. In episode 7 of *Transmission Gagavision* she explains to one of her back-up dancers what *The Fame* is all about: “I want people to find a sense of inner confidence and fame for themselves that has nothing to do with being famous” (“Transmission Gaga-vision – Episode 7”). She wants her fans to find their “inner fame,” a brand of self-assurance that does not rely on popularity. This sentiment drives Gaga and her art, but it leaves behind a lingering question: has Gaga really found fame or has she sacrificed her connection with her inner-self in the process of becoming famous? Who then is the monster, pop culture or Lady Gaga?

Before we can answer these questions, we must first define the term “monster” and then survey the monster’s role in American culture. The next chapter will abandon Lady Gaga for a moment and take on this task. After clarifying the meaning of the monster and its cultural significance, I will then introduce Cohen’s monster theory and apply it to Lady Gaga’s career. By creating this framework we can then analyze Gaga’s career through a focused lens.
Chapter 3

Monsters: A Cultural Obsession

In the preface to *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), Jeffrey Cohen declares: “We live in a time of monsters” (vii). Nineteen years later, this claim still holds. Popular media today bursts with cannibalistic zombies, poltergeists, and wide-eyed animated giants. The majority of the population subscribes to the belief that these monsters remain safely tucked away in the confines of the imagination, but others cling to the possibility that they do, in fact, exist. A branch of rogue zoologists, for example, founded a study devoted exclusively to the search for hidden animals. They call their field Cryptozoology and rely heavily on anecdotal information in their quest to prove that creatures like Big Foot and the Chupacabra enjoy corporeality (Laurance 30). With new forms of monsters appearing in the media on a regular basis, it appears that the monster is an alluring figure that fascinates human beings. Cohen looks at this phenomenon and develops an intriguing theory about monsters’ cultural significance devised of seven thesis statements. He explains that this obsession with monsters reveals something profound about human nature, the society that we live in, and our social anxieties. But before delving into his theory and how this all ties back to Lady Gaga, let me first define the terms “monster,” “monstrous,” and “monstrosity” and describe the monsters that proliferate in popular culture.

According to the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term “monstrous” means: “1.a. Of a thing (material or immaterial) deviating from the natural or conventional order; unnatural, extraordinary.” Or, simply: “2. a. Of, relating to, or characteristic of a monster; having the appearance or nature of a monster, esp. in being hideous or frightening” (“monstrous, adj.”). The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word “monstrosity” as: “2. the quality or state of being monstrous” (“monstrosity”). Unfortunately, definitions of the word “monster” aren’t as
clear-cut, because defining the word monster does not necessarily help delineate all the monsters encountered in popular culture. Most dictionaries describe monsters based on their threatening nature and ugly appearance. This of course captures the vast majority of monsters, but a second type exists: the child-friendly and adorable monster. Animated characters like Sulley, the furry blue giant from Disney’s *Monster’s Inc.* spring to mind. With his hilarious fear of small children, Sulley becomes the antithesis of the typical man-hating monster most people recognize. Along with characters like Cookie Monster, Shrek, and E.T., a benevolent population of monsters exists in the entertainment world. They provide comedy and a softer image that contradicts the violence exhibited by monsters like the zombie, the demon, or Godzilla.

Typing the word “monster” into the online OED generates seven different definitions. The first captures the connotations associated with a typical understanding of the term, the monster as ugly, man-eating bully:

1. a. Originally: a mythical creature which is part animal and part human or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly and frightening. (“monster, n.”)

The entry goes on to identify the monsters that belong in the first category: “The centaur, sphinx, and minotaur are examples of ‘monsters’ encountered by various mythical heroes; the griffin, wyvern, etc., are later heraldic forms.” These monsters conjure up very specific and predictable images. The centaur possesses the torso of a man and the bottom half of a horse, the sphinx a lion’s body and a human head, and the minotaur a bull’s head and a human body. Each clearly falls into the category of half-man half-beast and is composed of two recognizable species. The griffin and wyvern follow a similar formula: the griffin consists of a lion’s body and an eagle’s
head and wings, while the wyvern, or winged reptile, looks similar to modern day renditions of a dragon. These monsters exist as hybrids, creatures that simultaneously belong to two different categories.

The second portion of the OED’s definition captures the even more fantastic roots of the monster: the imagination. The creatures created by the human mind press beyond the boundary of the human/animal and do not adhere to a predictable formula. On the right side of the human brain, creativity abounds, and so does the monster’s form. From zombies and vampires to aliens and cyborgs, monsters appear in a plethora of horrifying forms. The figure of the monster that appears in popular culture exhibits this quality. A large selection of vicious beasts can be found in comic books, adult fiction, and young adult fantasy books. Some of the creatures created on the page have found their way to the silver screen, appearing in films like *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *I Am Legend* (2007), and *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer’s Stone* (2001). Monsters also crop up in business; a job-searching engine, a beverage company, and an electronics company all decided to identify their companies and products with the figure of the monster. Instead of thoroughly investigating the depiction of all the monsters found in popular culture, I will focus on the monsters that appear in films, television, and video games. The audience members who devour the imaginary creatures that dominate these venues are most likely the same people who pledge their allegiance to Lady Gaga and wish to join her cult of little monsters. Taking their frame of reference into account will aid in the process of understanding her tactics as an artist devoted to creating a monstrous identity.

In spite of the monster’s ability to take any imaginable form, an astonishing number depicted in pop culture look and attempt to behave like human beings. The monsters that appear in the *Twilight* films and the television series *Battlestar Gallactica* illustrate this point. Both
vampires and werewolves star in the *Twilight* series, and exhibit the monster’s ability to blend in with humanity. Unless inspired to transform, the werewolves maintain a human form that successfully hides their elevated body temperature and supernatural strength. The vampires achieve a similar disguise that only fails if they walk out into the sunlight. In *Twilight*, leading characters Edward (a vampire) and Jacob (a werewolf) fall in love with a human being: Bella. Slaves to their love, both characters rebel against their violent instincts and forge an alliance with the human race. This complicates the human v. monster conflict and effectively blurs the line between the two. The villainous cylons that appear in *Battlestar Galactica* perform the same task. In this space odyssey, human beings create a robot species (the cylons) that rebel and evolve into twelve human models. The cylons possess human bodies, but with an interesting catch: they cannot die. With their organic bodies wirelessly connected to a resurrection ship, they become powerful immortal enemies that effortlessly blend in with humanity. Bent on destroying the human race, the cylons blow up the humans’ planet and pursue the surviving fleet of ships searching for a new home. Ultimately, the cylons and the humans form an alliance, discover Earth, and begin breeding with one another to sustain both races. The final episode cuts to the bustling streets of present day New York City and coyly hints that the current human race might actually stem from monstrous roots.

These two series represent a small fraction of what exists in the entertainment industry’s monstrous canon. Monster based films span a large spectrum of genres including comedy, action, horror, science fiction, adventure, and even westerns (*Cowboys v. Aliens* (2011)). They even appear in Disney films like *The Little Mermaid* (Ursula, the half-octopus half-witch sea creature) and *Sleeping Beauty* (Maleficent, the green-skinned, yellow-eyed sorceress). Monsters rule the entertainment world, providing writers, filmmakers, and creative artists with the exhilarating task
of imagining and cultivating creatures capable of scaring, amusing, and attracting audiences. From *Star Wars* (1977) to *Avatar* (2009) and *Harry Potter* (2001–2011), audiences flock to movie theatres to escape mundane human existence and indulge in pure fantasy. Or they sit in the dark, allowing the terrifying cannibalistic zombies from films like *I Am Legend* (2007) to elevate their heart rates and adrenaline levels. The monster, at the very least, is an alluring figure created and enjoyed by human beings throughout history but especially--it seems--in late 20th century/early 21st century U.S. culture.

In addition to *Battlestar Galactica*, the television industry invests in a variety of monstrous characters and series. In 2008, HBO premiered Alan Ball’s vampire series *True Blood*. Soon to be in its fifth season, this show takes place in a fictional New Orleans town that attempts to integrate its vampire and human populations. Replete with cheesy sexual tension, the series’s leading lady, a telepathic waitress who also happens to be a fairy, finds herself caught in a vampire-studded love triangle. Not to be outdone by *Twilight*, the series also features not only werewolves, but also werepanthers who enter into the action packed episodes. If *True Blood* does not offer up enough violently driven thrills, then viewers can watch AMC’s zombie apocalypse *The Walking Dead* (2011), or Comedy Central’s *Ugly Americans* (2010). *Ugly Americans*, an extremely graphic animated series, takes place in an alternate version of New York City where monsters and humans co-exist in an oddly comedic world. A description of the series’s lead character captures this humor: “Between his stressful job, a zombie roommate, and a demon ex-girlfriend, Mark's lucky if he can sneak in a few minutes of sleep. But who can sleep when there's a drop-dead gorgeous Mermaid sitting at the bar?” (“Ugly American”). Clearly, the TV industry feeds its monster-obsessed consumers a steady diet of zombies, vampires, werewolves, and much more.
Not only do people emotionally invest in these monsters, but they also enjoy diving into the electronic world of video games where they can kill and impersonate them. One of the most popular games, *World of Warcraft* (2004), a massive multi-player online role playing game (MMORPG), allows players to create characters that then engage each other and computer-controlled enemies in battle. When the game begins, players get to select their character’s race. Their choices include thirteen different species ranging from orcs, goblins, and trolls to humans and dwarves. If they are so inclined, players can select a monstrous character. The game’s online community and alluring graphics may cause players to lose touch with reality. An online forum dedicated to helping people addicted to this video game entitled “WoW Detox” provides intriguing insight into the dangers of role playing games. On this website, members simply write their text in a box provided by the webpage and anonymously share their struggle. Each entry receives a numerical entry. In #55907 one gamer explains his addiction: “I think humans are ugly and everyone should look like an animated character. I need help and I know this, I came here to admit things I wouldn't admit to family, fiends or a work colleague” (“#55907”). Some players isolate themselves in the dangerous fantasy that they have become a monstrous character and expect society to accept their new vision of the world.

Clearly, a cultural obsession with monsters abounds. Because of this alarming fascination, scholars from across different disciplines have written essays, books, and articles that interrogate the monster’s societal purpose. Jeffrey Cohen, an English Professor at George Washington University who received his Ph.D. in English from Harvard, remains an important figure in this field. With *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), Cohen lays out seven theses about monsters and their cultural function. He takes bits of queer theory, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory, and arranges them to help explain how the monster becomes culturally
constructed. He immediately delves into an interrogation of the monster’s physical manifestation in his first thesis, which states that, “The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body” (4). He explains that, “[t]he monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph seeking a hierophant” (4). The monster’s body (an entity generated by human beings) contains a message that once deciphered reveals the tension at the heart of a systematized culture. In his book, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (2003), David D. Gilmore explains that: “monsters expose the radical permeability and artificiality of all our classificatory boundaries, highlighting the arbitrariness and fragility of culture” (19). Monsters remain cultural creations that reflect the anxiety of the human condition.

With his next thesis statement Cohen notes that, “The Monster Always Escapes” (4). Cohen observes that monsters somehow manage to constantly defy death. He uses a familiar monster to assert this point: “Regardless of how many times Sigourney Weaver’s beleaguered Ripley utterly destroys the ambiguous Alien that stalks her, its monstrous progeny return, ready to stalk again in another bigger-than-ever sequel” (5). The saga of human kind v. the monster lives in a cyclical realm because the monster possesses the ability to vanish and reappear. Cohen uses this feature of the monster to help clarify his theory and the difficult task of understanding these evasive creatures: “monstrous interpretation is as much process as epiphany, a work that must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses – signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself)” (6). With their propensity to suddenly dematerialize, monsters avoid not only death but also classification.

Cohen explores this property of the monster in his next thesis statement: “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis”(6). The figure of the monster is not a culturally recognized or
sanctified form. In fact, their bodies, their behavior, and their presence all challenge the entire notion of categorization. In his book, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (2003), David D. Gilmore reinforces this concept: “monsters expose the radical permeability and artificiality of all our classificatory boundaries, highlighting the arbitrariness and fragility of culture” (19). With their irregular shapes and sizes, monsters surpass the human form and challenge its supremacy. Cohen argues that “[t]he too precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in the freakish compilation of the monster’s body” (7). From legendary beasts to aliens, the figure of the monster encompasses a broad range of manifestations that cannot squeeze into a single category.

By the time he reaches his fourth statement, “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference” it becomes clear that Cohen looks at monsters in a specific structuralist context; monsters only exist because of a system that creates a divide between them and their human counterparts. The system that Cohen describes and that monsters challenge mirrors the system that Michel Foucault describes in “The Carceral” chapter from *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that society thrives on the impulse to define and abolish the abnormal. Looking at the carceral as a microcosm that represents society at large, Foucault creates a chilling portrait of culture as a normalizing system that perpetually observes and evaluates its subjects. Monsters, with their lack of a stable category, refuse to submit to the system that Foucault describes; they defy the powerful institutions that protect the carceral’s existence. Foucault asserts that with the support of medical and judicial institutions, the carceral system composes modern society. He states,

Thus, in the shelter of these two considerable protectors, and indeed, acting as a link between them, or a place of exchange, a carefully worked out technique for
the supervision of norms has continued to develop right up to the present day.

(1492)

The carceral system creates the need to fix the abnormal; therefore creating a need to also correct the monster, an overtly deviant figure. Like the allegedly abnormal, the monster creates a cultural crisis that simultaneously creates fear and pleasure. The terrifying fangs of the vampire represent death, but they can also represent transformation. If bitten and not drained of its blood, the vampire’s victim experiences re-birth rising from the grave as a monster.

What Foucault refers to as the abnormal, Erving Goffman refers to as the stigmatized. In his essay “Selections from Stigma,” Goffman defines the term stigmatized and makes an astute observation that ties back into the idea of the monster: “By definition of course, we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human” (132). Monsters simultaneously embody and exemplify stigmatized identities. Aware of the tight connection between the monstrous and the stigmatized, Cohen quickly brings queer studies into his discussion, and from this viewpoint constructs a compelling argument that correlates the monster with an unfixed sexual identity. He notes that, “[t]he woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith (‘die erste Eve,’ ‘la mere obscure), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon” (9). Anyone who defies cultural norms or carries a stigma elicits a panicked response and a monstrous label.

Cohen continues explaining his theory with his fifth statement: “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” (12). He explains that monster’s violent impulses discourage cultural change. He uses three familiar monsters to help him illustrate this point:

The giants of Patagonia, the dragons of the Orient, and the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park together declare that curiosity is more often punished than rewarded, that
one is better off safely contained within one’s own domestic sphere than abroad, away from the watchful eyes of the state. (12)

In *Jurassic Park*, the dinosaurs succeed in banishing their human co-stars back into domesticity, but in general human beings do not shy away from the monster. Cognizant of this, Cohen’s sixth statement reads: “Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire” (16). Because the monster does not remain boxed in a regulated identity, its presences allows uninhibited exploration (18). On the monster’s body, human beings play out whatever fantasy they can imagine. But since, as his final statement declares, “The Monster Stands on the Threshold of Becoming” no one can escape the questions the monster’s occurrence evokes (20). As Cohen claims, monsters remain human creations that “ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (20). Monsters point out the absurdity of enforcing strict boundaries that relegate certain individuals to the outskirts of acceptability. They continually reappear and, with their presence, beg for change.

Cohen’s description of monsters and the culture that creates them parallels Lady Gaga’s presence in pop culture and her eccentric appearance and behavior. As a self-proclaimed pop performance artist, Lady Gaga has inserted herself into the theatrical scene where she plays with the theme of monstrosity. She does not just write and perform pop music; she actively produces a persona who relies on the monstrous spectacle she creates with her outrageous costumes, her exaggerated make-up, and her colorful wigs. Using her outfits, her music videos, and her live performances as a platform, Lady Gaga modifies her image and transforms her body into a perpetually shifting surface that resists definition. She shocks and challenges her audience and uses the world of popular culture to explore her performative impulses. Gaga embraces her position as a pop idol and uses it as a stage upon which she demands a cultural revolution.
Inspired by Cohen’s theory and Gaga’s career, I have decided to address Gaga's monstrous persona by paring down Cohen’s seven thesis statements into three of my own: Lady Gaga celebrates stigmatized identities by glorifying their monstrosity; Lady Gaga transgresses cultural boundaries by reconstructing her body to appear more monstrous; Lady Gaga sexualizes her monstrosity with her alluring feminine flesh.

I. Lady Gaga Celebrates Stigmatized Identities by Glorifying Their Monstrosity

Gaga detests normalcy. In fact, she fears being associated with anything resembling the expected or average. By celebrating her own eccentricity and dedicating herself to maintaining an unconventional identity, Gaga invites her fans to do the same. She fearlessly exalts the weird, the odd, and the socially unacceptable, and thus embraces her fans in spite of the stigmatized identities that they might bear. With one of her latest hits, “Born This Way,” Lady Gaga unflinchingly declares this sentiment. Society tells us that certain races, genders, sexual orientations, income levels and disabilities have the power to ostracize and condemn us. Lady Gaga tells us with this song that people should not be ashamed of these identities or allow them to dictate happiness. The bridge of the song captures her message:

Don’t be a drag, just be a queen/ Whether you’re broke or evergreen/ You’re black, white, beige, chola descent/ You’re Lebanese, you’re orient/ Whether life’s disabilities/ Left you outcast, bullied, or teased/ Rejoice and love yourself today/ ‘Cause baby you were born this way/ No matter gay, straight, or bi, / Lesbian, transgendered life/ I’m on the right track baby/ I was born to survive ( “Born This Way” Born This Way).

She vehemently opposes society’s definition of normal, and instead of perpetuating the taboo associated with non-normative identities, she venerates them, neutralizing the negative
connotations that society places upon them. Like a monster, Lady Gaga refuses to submit to societal restraints. She defies its prescription for normalcy by trampling its enforced limitations. **II. Lady Gaga Transgresses Cultural Boundaries By Reconstructing Her Body to Appear More Monstrous**

Lady Gaga creates her monstrous image by fusing the human body with technology and by borrowing the shapes of pre-existing monsters. She creates stunning visual images and characters that challenge convention. She fuses herself with objects and images labeled eccentric and odd in order to shock and challenge society and its cultural norms. In her music video for “Bad Romance,” she covers herself in sheer red lace that resembles a glamorous modern day zombie. In the “Paparazzi” video, she dons a metal plate that disguises her human features. And in her video for “Born This Way,” she uses prosthetic flesh to change the shape of her shoulders from a familiar roundedness to a pointed alien-likeness. Using this costume-induced monstrosity, Gaga resists categorization and possesses the potential to unexpectedly change forms. Her unwillingness to occupy a single recognizable identity threatens the integrity of the system created by cultural boundaries. With costumes that often obscure her human form and music videos that do more than just show off her half-naked body, Gaga refuses to play the part of the simple-minded sex object: the female pop star. Instead she constantly shifts her identity, her shape, and her sound in an attempt to evade classification. **III. Lady Gaga Sexualizes Her Monstrosity With Her Alluring Feminine Flesh**

Lady Gaga uses sex appeal to attract viewers to her monsters. She mixes technology and prosthesis with her body, but she rarely abandons the arresting tease of her exposed flesh. Her costumes often consist of elaborate strings placed to accentuate her taut body while covering her private parts. In the music video “Paparazzi,” she wears a black outfit that consists solely of thin
black strips of fabric strategically placed to expose as much of her body as possible. Because of her near-nakedness, the monsters that she creates still ooze with an odd sexuality that attracts people to watch her videos, to listen to her songs, and to attend her concerts. The plain-featured Stefani Germanotta creates an alluring persona, Lady Gaga, who then entices her audience with her sexy yet monstrous characters and costumes.

Her sexuality also presents a glaring contradiction. By relying on her thin physique, Lady Gaga re-inscribes a dangerous cultural norm: in order to be attractive, women must be thin. She attempts to challenge the cultural norms that surround her, but she never abandons the need to maintain the perfect body. This inconsistency in her work signals yet another layer of her monstrous persona. With the tension between her carefully maintained figure and her benevolent lyrics to “Born This Way,” she appears to straddle the divide between pop cultural norms and her view of a utopian society.

True to her monstrous identity, Gaga does not always dress provocatively. In her 2011 Thanksgiving Special for ABC, Gaga presented family-friendly looks that made her appear soft, warm, and approachable. Sometimes she hides her entire body in massive costume pieces that obscure her human form. For her performance on Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rockin’ Eve 2011 that aired on ABC, Gaga entered the stage in a bulbous black sequined outfit that contained a small circular cutout that revealed only her face. She arrived at the 2011 Grammy awards in a giant embryo that she refers to as “the vessel.” Like the monsters that appear in popular culture, she displays both the ability to shock and to appease; she achieves this by covering and subsequently exposing her flesh.

Unlike most monsters, Lady Gaga is an idiosyncratic fabrication; Stefani actively creates Lady Gaga. She’s not like Frankenstein, a patchwork of dead bodies sewn together and in search
of her creator. She’s a self-made monster that uses her creations to question culture. Exploring the monstrous theme that evolves over the course of her three albums *The Fame, The Fame Monster*, and *Born This Way* the following chapters will apply the three thesis statements to a specific selection of live performances, music videos, and songs. This analysis will help illuminate the fact that Lady Gaga is more than just a pop diva; she is a politically progressive artist bent on disrupting a suffocating cultural system. Beginning with “The Crevette” films and ending with the “Born This Way” music video, this thesis will chart Gaga’s rise to monster-dom.
Chapter 4
Robots and Aliens: Gaga’s Initial Forays into Monster-dom

Even before she declared herself the mother monster, Lady Gaga engaged with the monstrous. This may not have been clear when she first stepped into the pop culture arena, but over the course of creating and promoting both The Fame and the Fame Ball Tour her monstrous tendency slowly became apparent. Surrounded by a legacy of air headed blonde singers (Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, etc.) Gaga decided to annihilate the superficial identity that typically devours the female pop star. She appropriated the blonde hair, the tan skin, and the skimpy clothing but refused to let them dictate her artistic aesthetic. Inspired by Andy Warhol, science fiction, and performance art, Gaga turned the dumb blonde construct into a mutable surface that allowed her to surpass pop culture’s expectations. Devoid of the familiar trappings that surround the female pop artist, Gaga began to explore her monstrous impulses. With her introduction to Transmission Gagavision, her “Crevette Films,” and her “Paparazzi” music video, Gaga toys with familiar monsters: the alien and the robot. In these first iterations of her pop performance art Gaga reaches for the monster but it evades her advances. With her live performance of “Paparazzi” at the 2009 Video Music Awards (VMAs) Gaga grasps her monstrous potential. The introduction to Transmission Gagavision, her “Crevette Films,” and her “Paparazzi” music video remain clues that collectively hint at the monster to come.

With the introduction to Transmission Gagavision, Gaga establishes herself as some kind of extraterrestrial being commissioned to change human culture. The introduction takes place in outer space and contains a thumping underscore complete with a starry background and the electric clink of scrolling text. A computerized voice reads the white text that blazes across the screen, slowly fading into the black and white feed that charts Gaga performing backstage, in her
dressing room, and chatting with her crew. The message that scrolls across the screen indicates that she did not originate on Earth, but rather arrived from some unknown location. The introduction states: “Lady Gaga has been sent to Earth to infiltrate human culture one sequin at a time” (“Lady Gaga – Transmission”). Her intentions do not sound evil or threatening but comical. How exactly does change occur on the sequin level? Perhaps she will use the shiny devices to convert her fans to Gagaism and with them propagate a culture of fashion loving divas that refuse to submit to conventional order? While humorous and a tad cheesy, this science fiction-influenced introduction establishes that early on in her career Lady Gaga toyed with monstrosity. In *Transmission Gagavision* she plays with an otherworldly persona capable of confronting an entire species and their culture. Gaga cleverly adopts pop culture’s fascination with aliens and outer space and uses familiar graphics and a stock storyline to announce her arrival. With her techno influenced music and her disco stick she enters the music industry a programmed Gaga-tron with a clear yet bizarre mission.

Or does she re-enter this culture? The introduction to *Transmission Gagavision* does not clearly establish whether Lady Gaga is an extraterrestrial creature or a human being who has been abducted and returned to Earth. In typical alien abduction stories, the alien places a probe or some sort of chip inside of the human being. The message in the introduction goes on to read: “Activate camera probe. Initiate Transmission Gagavision” (“Lady Gaga – Transmission”). This line implies that some outside force watches Lady Gaga via an implanted gadget that it controls. But aren’t the transmissions for her fans? Why would the outside force share transmissions with the very human culture that Gaga is attempting to infiltrate? With this odd inconsistency, Lady Gaga creates an intriguing duality that allows her to question her identity as a pop star. By situating herself in the alien narrative in *Transmission Gagavision*, she offers up an alluring
creation myth. Instead of hiding the fact that she is a commodified product that has been reshaped and packaged to attract an audience, Gaga exposes this fact and assimilates it into her artistic vision. She proposes that Lady Gaga is not a this-worldly artistic creation but rather an extraterrestrial product. This extremely ridiculous idea attracts the audience’s interest.

In the “Crevette Films” Gaga continues to explore an alienated make-believe world, this time through an automated character: Candy Warhol. With her blonde wig, her vintage sunglasses, and her electric pink high heels Candy visually harkens to Andy Warhol’s Pop Art aesthetic. As Richard Schechner points out in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, “Warhol appropriated images from American pop culture – Campbell’s soup cans, Marilyn Monroe – and repositioned them as high art” (4). Gaga adopts Warhol’s perspective and uses her “Crevette Films” to poach the iconic image of the brainless yet beautiful pop star. In fact, Gaga takes a lot of her artistic cues from Warhol, including her attempt to make pop music high art, her Haus of Gaga, and her obsession with fashion. During an interview for *The Guardian* in 2009, Gaga told Laura Barton,

> I strive to be a female Warhol. I want to make films and music, do photography and paint one day, maybe. Make fashion. Make big museum art installations. I would be a bit more mixed-media than him probably – combining mixed media and imagery and doing more of a kind of a weird pop-art piece. (qtd. in Barton n. pag.)

While clearly inspired by Warhol, Candy and the “Crevette Films” actually read more like a Brechtian epic rather than a kitschy Pop Art installation. With Candy and the “Crevette Films,” Gaga creates a fictive cosmos that allows her to interrogate the identity that pop culture wants her to inhabit. From the lack of a fourth wall to the titles that announce each vignette, Gaga
distances herself from her audience. She dodges the expectations that pop culture places upon her and instead creates an alternative narrative that releases her from the clichéd saga of the typical pop princess.

As mentioned in the first chapter, these films appeared during the Fame Ball Tour and consist of three vignettes: *The Heart*, *The Brain*, and *The Face*. The word crevette is a French term that translated into English means shrimp (Barton n. pag.). Like the small shellfish that typically act as appetizers, Gaga’s “Crevette Films” prepare her audience for The Fame Ball Tour and distract them as she changes from one outrageous costume to the next. Still posted on YouTube, these three films stand outside the framework of the tour; they are her earliest pieces of pop performance art. In each vignette, Candy appears alongside an unnamed male character that acts as her confidant. With his clipped British voice he asks Candy a series of questions that drive the fifty-second episodes. Each episode focuses on these two characters in three unidentified but predominantly white environments and center on Candy’s relationship with Pop (Gaga’s name for pop culture). In the films, which appear to the audience as a series called “Who Shot Candy Warhol?,” Candy plays the part of the innocent victim of pop culture’s appetite for nubile flesh. In *The Heart* and *The Brain*, Candy confesses that Pop ate both of these pivotal organs. By evacuating her of the essential biological structures, Gaga strips this character of her humanity. Without a heart or a brain Candy continues to function when she should have died; Candy exists as an empty vessel devoid of consciousness or a soul.

With this character and her estranged state, Gaga firmly sets a boundary between herself, her audience, and pop culture. She accomplishes the same feat that Brecht observes in the alienated Chinese actor: “The artist’s objective is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything
put forward by him has a touch of the amazing” (455). Brecht saw this technique as a means to access the social potential inherent in theatre; Gaga uses this theatrical tactic as a way to control, understand, and manipulate her identity. Lady Gaga does not attempt to make a clear distinction between herself and her character; she lets the two visually combine and comment on one another. As The Heart ends, a voiceover of Lady Gaga combined with more footage of Candy Warhol introduces the show (this segment of the show exists on YouTube as “The Haus Introduction”). The footage of Candy quickly becomes a collage of images that conflate Gaga and her fictional character. Taking on the robotic tone she created for Candy, Gaga introduces her show with an electronically voiced monologue:

I need m-m-m-more, to feed my pop heart. Give me more! I want: the Future,

Gaga, Fashion, T-t-technology, Dance, New York, Music, Pop Culture! I want The Fame.

I can hear you! Can you hear me? The revolution is coming and I want. W-w-we want,

you deserve. The future. My name is Lady Gaga and this is my Haus! (“Crevette Films”)

Gaga claims the show, the “Crevette Films,” and Candy Warhol as her artistic property. She tosses aside the pretense of a fourth wall and directly addresses her audience: “I can hear you! Can you hear me?” (“Lady Gaga Pop ate my heart”). Before the projection screen rises to reveal Gaga center stage, a final image flashes across the screen: an explosion of red and orange flames. She demolishes the preconceptions attached to the stage and introduces herself as a new species of pop artist: a sovereign creative artist in charge of her persona.

Gaga uses this concept to create a safe forum for her “revolution.” She does not describe this revolution or the future that her audience deserves; instead she uses lyrics and performance to illustrate her point. During a transitional moment in the show she speaks with her fans: “Some say Lady Gaga is a lie. And they are right. I am a lie. And everyday I kill to make it true” (“Lady
Gaga – The Fame Ball Tour DVD Part 5”). Here, Gaga’s aesthetics diverge from Brecht’s prescription for defamiliarization. She does not want to play the part of Lady Gaga; she wants to become Lady Gaga. In “A Short Organum For the Theatre” Brecht describes how the actor must proceed: “At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: ‘ he didn’t act Lear, he was Lear’ would be an annihilating blow to him” (193). Gaga strives to be a walking work of art and does not want her fans to question who or what Lady Gaga is, she wants them to accept her façade and join her in a futuristic dimension where her artistic truths dictate reality. The act of converting the current realm into such a fantasy defines her call for revolution. Using her performance as a gateway, Gaga accesses this future; with a crowd of screaming fans, her props, her costumes, and her films, Lady Gaga for an instant transcends the restraints of her artistic artificiality. The desire to taste this moment drives Lady Gaga’s quest to constantly maintain her position in the spotlight.

For Lady Gaga, being famous is the key to living in this reality. As a celebrity she enjoys an elevated status that entitles her to the stage, the fans, and the open mike that transport her into a permanent state of Gaga. Instead of smugly lording her stature over others, Gaga strives to share the secret behind it. She describes her concept of fame to Laura Barton:

I think there's “fame,” which is plastic and you can buy it on the street, and paparazzi and money and being rich, and then there's “the fame,” which is when no one knows who you are but everybody wants to know who you are. That's what this whole record's about, this record beckons for everybody on the planet to stop being either jealous or obsessive about what they don't have and start acting like they do. (qtd. in Barton n. pag.)
Gaga uses Candy to explore “the fame” and to communicate its liberating properties. In *The Heart*, Candy explains that Pop is “a beautiful monster” and that the absence of a blood pumping muscle in her chest makes her feel free. In *The Brain*, Candy’s confidant confronts her brainless state and tells her, “Well we can honestly say that you’ve lost your mind” (“Crevette Films”). Instead of collapsing into the drama of this revelation, Candy calmly informs him, “No, I know exactly where it is . . . In his belly of course” (“Crevette Films”). Cleansed of her mortality and any residual psychological repression, Candy now lives for “the fame.” Gaga uses Candy’s narrative as a metaphor for her deconstructed identity. Like Candy, Gaga resides in an artistic sphere cleared of human inhibitions. Using this open space, Gaga begins to build her monstrous theme. She uses the final vignette in the series, *The Face*, to justify this artistic leap.

With her face covered by a layer of nude pantyhose, Candy grasps a yellow plastic gun as she explains that Pop wants a new face. Her male co-star insists that she play this role and introduce herself to the audience. She replies hesitantly, “My name is . . . My name is . . . Miss Candy Warhol” (“Crevette Films”). This answer does not satisfy him and he replies, “No, your real name” (“Crevette Films”). Candy raises the gun and says, “I don’t understand the question” (“Crevette Films”). The two fight over the gun until finally it goes off in a series of three loud shots. As the popping noise of the gun resonates, the image on the screen freezes, shrinks, and repeats itself. Gaga wants to be pop culture’s new face; she wants to unite with its fluid surface, but she wants this process to happen on her own terms. She enacts the violence of her relationship with pop culture, her controlling confidant (who perhaps represents her subconscious), and her final victory over both. Freed of these restraints Gaga can now use her body to explore monstrous characters, costumes, and ideas.
In the music video for “Paparazzi,” Lady Gaga tests out this new possibility. She does not openly engage with monstrous characters, but warms up to them with a few props, and two of her costumes. With a full story line, subtitles, several costume changes, and a murderous ending, “Paparazzi” appears professional, calculated, and intelligent. Directed by Jonas Åkerlund, it remains the only video from *The Fame* that hints at Gaga’s budding monstrosity. Continuing with the electronic motif introduced in *Transmission Gagavision* and the “Crevette Films,” the two monstrous outfits that Gaga displays in this video pair her body with shiny metal in an attempt to re-shape her human form. The video begins in Gaga’s bedroom where Gaga and her lover dialogue in French before beginning a make out session that leads them to the balcony. Alexander Skarsgård, an actor most commonly known for his role as Eric, the hunky bad-boy vampire on *True Blood*, plays this role. Sitting on the edge of the balcony and straddling this tall muscular man, Gaga realizes that he has lured her outside so that the paparazzi can capture their intimacy. She attempts to push him away but fails as he overpowers her and pushes her over the edge. Gaga falls to the ground in a bejeweled heap and promptly returns wearing a metallic neck brace covered in red sequins.

Flanked by a posse of tuxedo wearing male dancers she reenters the mansion in a wheelchair. Once inside the building, the male dancers strip her of the neck brace and her top. The camera flashes to another scene and by the time her wheelchair is in the frame again she has changed outfits and now wears metallic cyborg gear. The costume consists of a gold one-piece strapless metallic bathing suit that clings tightly to her body. The look continues with a gold metallic plate covering her head and a thick piece of the same metal wrapping around both her neck and her left arm; she looks like a carbon copy of a model that appears in George Michael’s 1992 music video “Too Funky” (Rifai n. pag.). Both outfits appear inspired by Fritz Lang’s 1927
film, *Metropolis* and its evil robot that masquerades as the film's leading female character, Maria. Completing the outfit, Gaga braces herself on two forearm crutches that allow her to continue dancing without the use of her legs. With this outfit, her wheelchair, and her crutches Gaga experiments with a simultaneously disabled and robotic appearance. She takes on the stigma of the disabled body and attempts to make it appear glamorous by incorporating the skimpy metallic outfit. Unlike most depictions of the disabled body, this one appears attractive and fashionable.

In her article "Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse," Sharon Betcher applauds Gaga’s effort to incorporate the disabled form into her video:

> If some disability theorists find her not at all “representative,” I’m less worried about “disability realism” than I am excited to see the audience invited to metabolize—with and through her performance art—a different relationship to the “monstrosity” of flesh, the mix of pleasure, pain, and performativity (especially given that disability is often flattened into “suffering” and ever suspected then of false performance). (114)

Betcher makes this observation after including a line straight out of an academic paper that Stefani Germanotta wrote while in 2004 at Tisch. Betcher gathers this information from Robert Everett-Green’s article from *Globe and Mail* entitled “Gaga Over Lady Gaga.” Allegedly based on Montaigne’s essay “Of a Monstrous Child,” Stefani’s paper “distinguishes between the shackled ‘social body’ and the natural body that is ‘independent, formless and free’”(Everett-Green n. pag.). Stefani asserts in the paper that, “For the deformed, there is an ownership of one's difference, an ownership that is visible and indisputable” (qtd. in Everett-Green n. pag.). Because
of Gaga’s argument, Betcher sees Gaga’s performance in a positive light. However, Betcher does not thoroughly interrogate Gaga’s representation, which after a second look does not appear as encouraging as either Betcher or Gaga desire.

A blogger referred to as “anaham” points out in a post called *The Transcontinental Disability Choir: Disability Chic? (Temporary) Disability in Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi,”* that Gaga offends with her severely limited representation of the disabled body. Posted on the website for *Bitch* magazine, this blogger’s article makes a series of important observations. The section in question only lasts for about fifty seconds during a seven-minute long video, and ultimately reveals Gaga’s recovery. Her entire disabled display occurs indoors and away from the cameras, suggesting that this remains the only acceptable space to explore disability. It appears that Gaga uses the wheelchair and her crutches to shock her audience, which further marginalizes the disabled. As “anaham” points out, “Paparazzi” sends a chilling message: “Disability can be ‘cool,’ but only if it is temporary, not shown to the public, and that your eventual recovery from it can be portrayed through the timeless medium of dance!” (anaham n. pag., original emphasis). Gaga’s attempt to portray a positive view of the disabled body fails as she effortlessly slides back into her able-bodied form and seeks revenge on her boyfriend.

In spite of the offensive nature of this segment in her video, Gaga claims that it actually garnered a heartening reaction from some of her disabled fans. In a 2010 interview for *Vanity Fair,* Lisa Robinson asks: “Did you get protests from organizations for the physically challenged?” (Robinson n. pag.). Gaga answers her question and quickly changes the subject: “No, I had girls in wheelchairs crying to me at meet-and-greets, telling me that when they saw that video it changed their lives. And while my fascination with celebrity has almost left the building, I had this incredible fascination with how people love watching celebrities fall apart . . .
Prompted by an odd question, Gaga describes her inspiration for the video and its humor. Lisa Robinson asks her: “It's certainly not politically correct, but I think it's hilarious. Was that your intention?” Gaga replies in the affirmative and goes on to explain,

> Listen the intention of that video was to show the hilarity to which people will fame-whore themselves. It was playing with the idea that I knew my style was something that people really were admiring. So I thought, well, what's the most ridiculous thing that we could immortalize? Something not fashion at all and make it fashion. And I was [looking at] a lot of Helmut Newton books and photographs, and there were all these disabled women who looked fabulous. So I thought watching the celebrity fall apart is so fascinating to everybody, why don't I just fall apart for seven minutes and see what happens. (Robinson n. pag.)

It seems that Gaga remains naively unaware of her severe faux pas, and considers her “Paparazzi” video a clever allegory of her own death. She completely side steps the issue at hand and instead of justifying her bold choice she deflects the concept onto Newton’s photography. She equates falling apart with the disabled body and unfortunately with this statement contradicts the message at the heart of Montaigne’s essay.

In “Of a monstrous child” Montaigne defends the disabled or deformed body and blames any monstrous connotations on humanity’s inability to recognize God’s creations:

> What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is
good and ordinary and regular; but we do not see its arrangement and relationship.

(539)

Later in her career, Gaga creates a persona that shares this vision; we can see her grasping toward, but failing to secure, this profound insight in *The Fame*. In the “Paparazzi” video she sports the stigmatized disabled body but only for a moment and with the intention to embody the “ridiculous.” The remaining monstrous references that she sprinkles throughout the video get lost in the overwhelming superficiality of the video and its botched humor. Toward the end of the video she wears a yellow jumpsuit decorated by what look like Mickey Mouse heads when seen from afar but up close are revealed to be tiny Gaga heads wearing black Mickey Mouse helmets. With her round black glasses and similarly shaped shoulder pads, she looks like a cartoon but the costume does not make any attempt to disguise her human form or her curves. Instead the outfit looks campy with confusing pop culture connotations. When she finally kills her boyfriend and calls the police, a crew of scientists comes in to dispose of the body. They all wear glasses that contain skeleton holograms. These tiny details alone connect the rest of the video to a monstrous theme, mere after thoughts lost in the video’s revenge-driven plot.

Still striving to hit her artist stride, Gaga remounted “Paparazzi,” this time for a live audience at a televised event: the 2009 Video Music Awards (VMA). During this performance she succeeded in creating the artistic death she attempted to convey in the “Paparazzi” music video. Available on YouTube, this four and a half minute production captures Gaga in a moment of gory bravery. The piece begins as a giant red curtain rises to reveal Gaga lying on the floor in an intricate and skimpy white costume, thigh high boots, and an iridescent mask decorated by two giant feathers. After she sings the melodious introduction to the song – “Can’t read my/ Can’t read my/ No he can’t read my poker face/ Amidst all of these flashing lights I pray the
fame will take my life” – the familiar opening to “Paparazzi” begins (“Lady Gaga Paparazzi Live MTV VMA 2009 HD”). Gaga slowly rises to her feet and dramatically dances across the stage accompanied by a fleet of back-up dancers all clad in tight white outfits. Not entirely finished with her disabled body motif she uses a forearm crutch to hobble towards her audience as a male back-up dancer spins a female dancer in a wheelchair. This segments lasts for less than twenty seconds and remains an unnecessary element among an otherwise brilliant performance. Three minutes into the song, Gaga abandons her choreography and struts to a white grand piano located stage right. She sits at the piano with her left leg lifted and resting on the keyboard and bangs on the keys while violently tossing her head and dramatically lifting her arms. As she finishes her interlude she rises up from the piano bench and heads down stage towards her audience as thick red blood begins to pour down her exposed midriff. She belts out, “I’m your biggest fan/ I’ll follow you until you love me/ Papa/ PAPARAZZI/ Baby there’s no superstar/ You know that I’ll be/ Your Papa- PAPARAZZI ” as she stutters upstage (“Lady Gaga Paparazzi Live MTV VMA 2009 HD”). The lyrics to the song continue as her back-up dancers converge on Gaga. She lets out a few guttural cries as they attach her right arm to a cable. In a swift jerking motion Gaga ascends above her crew and as the last few measures of the song come screeching to an end she tosses her microphone to the floor. A haze of red light bathes the stage as she hangs with fake blood dripping down her body.

Aware of the fleeting nature of fame, Gaga decides to sever her parasitic relationship with pop culture. With this piece she puts an end to the anticipation of her eventual fall from pop stardom and the fear that it creates. Using stylized choreography, a revealing costume, and the shock of her final tableau Gaga publically sacrifices herself. This act allows her to investigate her monstrous identity without the need to placate the cultural apparatus through which she
communicates her art. Instead of spending her time waiting for the inevitable destruction of her career via media scandal, Gaga enacts her death and thus deflates the power pop culture holds over her. With this performance Gaga begins to carve herself a niche within pop culture that allows her to explore the shape-shifting figure of the monster. Not yet cloaked in a monstrous persona, Gaga channels the monster’s spirit and with her shocking performance tramples the boundaries that pop culture attempts to place around her.

Gaga’s violent performance prepares her fans for the many monsters that populate the videos, the songs, and the performances that populate The Fame Monster and Born This Way. The Fame does not contain lyrics that reference the creature at the gates of difference or its limitless image. Instead, The Fame allows Gaga to attract a powerful audience that will encourage her forays into monster-dom. In The Fame Monster, Gaga introduces the “Manifesto of Little Monsters” and eight new songs that blatantly engage with a monstrous theme. By the time she releases Born This Way, Gaga becomes synonymous with this theme as she declares herself the mother monster. As the mother monster, Gaga evolves into a benevolent savior figure that protects, nurtures, and defends her fans. Peter Kline, a doctoral candidate in theological studies at Vanderbilt University, wrote an article for Gaga Stigmata (an online scholarly journal) that compares Gaga’s body of work with the Christian faith. He titles his article, “A Religion Against Itself: Lady Gaga, God, and Love,” and compares Gaga’s 2009 VMA performance with images of the crucifixion. He points out that Gaga’s “death opens a space of freedom for her art and for her fans, creating a space for all those ‘little monsters’ who otherwise would be excluded and ignored by the very cultural powers that Gaga allows to crush her” (Kline n. pag.). With Transmission Gagavision, her “Crevette Films,” and the “Paparazzi” music video Gaga hints at the monstrous potential she finally realizes on the stage of the 2009 VMAs. Fueled by this
performance and the inspiration it unlocks, Gaga begins to create and explore the figure of the monster.
Chapter 5

The Monsters Within: Gaga Slays the Fame Monster

With *The Fame Monster*, Gaga blatantly announces a monstrous theme and enacts a series of monster characters. Consisting of eight new songs that reference zombies, werewolves, and vampires, *The Fame Monster* reflects Gaga’s relationships with her fans, her fame, and her sexual identity. Using the figure of the monster as a metaphor, Gaga transcends the superficialities of her first album and establishes herself as a powerful shape-shifting artist with a philanthropic motive. Along with *The Fame Monster*, Gaga released “The Manifesto of Little Monsters,” a document that defines her unique relationship with her fans. With this album, its music videos, and “The Manifesto of Little Monsters,” Gaga makes an effort to challenge not only pop culture but also the society that sustains its existence. Armed with her cult of little monsters, Gaga begins to morph into the benevolent mother monster, but not before she seduces her audience and slays the fame monster. In the music video for “Bad Romance,” Gaga abandons the mechanical motif she explored in *The Fame* and uses C.G.I. to refigure her body into the shape of a monster. Cloaked in costumes inspired by the figure of the monster, Gaga remounts songs from *The Fame* to fit within her next headlining tour, The Monster Ball Tour. Using her stage and her album as a pulpit, Gaga preaches acceptance by engaging that which society labels unacceptable. She uses the motif of this album to establish herself as a fearless performer capable of using her art to ignite political change.

When Gaga released *The Fame Monster* she told PR Newswire (a news and multimedia distributor) that, “While traveling the world for two years, I've encountered several monsters, each represented by a different song on the new record: my 'Fear of Sex Monster,' my 'Fear of Alcohol Monster,' my 'Fear of Love Monster,' my 'Fear of Death Monster,' my 'Fear of
Loneliness Monster,' etc.” (“Lady Gaga Returns With 8 New Songs”). These titles suggest that Gaga's monsters come from within; her fear of certain things brings them to life. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* she explains to Brian Hiatt that, “I believe, that innately we're all born with the monsters already inside of us — I guess in Christianity they call it original sin — the prospect that we will, at some point, sin in our lives, and we will, at some point, have to face our own demons, and they're already inside of us” (qtd. in Hiatt, “Inside The Monster Ball”). With *The Fame Monster* and the Monster Ball Tour, Gaga confronts these monsters in an attempt to transcend them. She goes on to tell Hiatt about the development of the record: “we talked about growth, and that led us into this kind of scientific space, and we started talking about evolution and the evolution of humanity and how we begin as one thing, and we become another” (qtd. in Hiatt, “Inside The Monster Ball”). Stefani Germanotta transformed herself into Lady Gaga, a malleable persona who, like the monster, stands at the edge of becoming. With her lyrical, cinematic, and theatrical creatures Gaga develops this persona, her art, and her relationship with her fans.

In “Bad Romance,” Gaga uses raunchy lyrics and a gothic sound to send an uplifting message. Throughout the song, Gaga growls: ‘I want your ugly/ I want your disease/ I want your everything as long as its free/ I want your love . . . I want your horror/ I want your design/ cuz’ you’re a criminal as long as you’re mine . . . I want your psycho/ your vertical stick/ want you in my rear window/ baby you’re sick/ I want your love” (“Bad Romance” *The Fame Monster*). She takes the grotesque things that society abhors – disease, crime, horror, psychosis, sodomy, and physical repulsion – and declares them attractive. With these lyrics she accepts the unseemly side of human nature and compassionately creates a community where freaks, deviants, and misfits belong. In an interview on Fuse TV with Touré (a music journalist, essayist, novelist, and TV
host), Gaga spells out the message at the heart of this song: “I want all the most disgusting parts of you that you think nobody will love” (“Lady Gaga – Explains Bad Romance”). Later in the interview she explains the motive behind her career choice: “I got into the music business to liberate.” Touré follows up this response with two more questions: “Liberate who? And from what?” (“Lady Gaga, On the Record with Fuse (The Lost Tapes”). Gaga explains that she wants to liberate the entire world “from whatever it is that’s chaining you or imprisoning you or making you feel like a freak sometimes. My shows, my music [are] all part of a performance art piece that’s designed to liberate” (“Lady Gaga, On the Record with Fuse (The Lost Tapes)”). With the message behind “Bad Romance” Gaga certainly attempts to rescue her fans from that which makes them feel like “freaks.”

But the follow up question that Touré neglects to ask and Gaga does not answer is, how? Gaga does not explain the plan of attack that will achieve her romantic desire to emancipate the entire world from repression. This reticence is not too surprising. In interviews Gaga plays the part of the humble and misunderstood musician. Demonstrating her protean talents, Lady Gaga adapts to the interview situation, changing into a new shape. She sits across from Touré and politely converses with him even though she still wears her idiosyncratic Gaga garb. She implies throughout the interview that her fans can find freedom in her music, but what exactly does that mean? While passionate, her intentions seem dangerously unclear. Her general proclamations make her sound altruistic, but ultimately remain confusing and obscure. Viewed through an academic's analytical spectacles, her responses seem suspect but her sentimentality appeals to a trusting audience. She seduces her fans not only with this sweet interviewee personality, but also with her audacious on screen presence.
In the “Bad Romance” music video, Gaga takes on the character of the zombie, the devil, and the criminally insane in order to explore a grotesque vision of love. As discussed, the lyrics of this song make a profound proclamation that supersedes the message of her first hit single: “Just Dance.” Lady Gaga hired Francis Lawrence to direct this film. The majority of his filmography remains music videos, but among his full length feature films are *I am Legend* (2007) and *Constantine* (2005). With his experience in the sci-fi and horror genres, he proved to be an ideal collaborator for this project. The video begins as the camera zooms in on a motionless Gaga seated in a white chair in a white room dominated by florescent lighting. A group of female dancers pose on the floor at her feet and around the room. A group of men dressed in black mingle with the dancers and fill out the space. A handful of both the men and women wear masks that cover their eyes and Gaga wears a pair of sunglasses made of razor blades. A creepy string melody begins as the camera closes in on the frozen group of people. Gaga lifts her finger off the black box from which the music emanates. This triggers the beginning beats of “Bad Romance” which take over the sound system. As the introduction to “Bad Romance” plays, everyone in the room comes to life.

The camera quickly shifts to another scene in the same eerily lit room. As this occurs a title made of red text fades into the frame: “Bath Haus of Gaga” (“Bad Romance” *YouTube*). As the sun peeks in through the thin rectangular windows that flank the back wall, a row of white coffins is revealed. On the front of the central coffin, a red cross and the word “monster” look as if they have been painted onto its shiny ceramic surface. As the catchy gothic thump of the music begins, the coffins creak open and a fleet of white female zombies emerge. They wear tight white spandex costumes that rise up over their necks and cover their faces and adorn their heads with a spiky crown. Gaga’s costume contains a hole for her mouth, which enables her to sing, and her
back-up zombies possess little eye holes that enable them to see. They move their bodies in stiff jerks dominated by their hands, which are curled up and poised like the claws of an angry beast. As the video progresses the camera shifts to this scene and captures the dancing zombies who manage to escape the confines of their coffins, but never the room.

Unlike the “Paparazzi” music video a cohesive narrative does not drive “Bad Romance.” Two minutes into the video, a group of dancers contain Gaga in a brown trench coat and drag her into the center of the room. They rip off her coat and a half-naked Gaga struts in front of a posse of men. With a crown of jewels that hangs over her eyes and a metal mesh top that strategically covers her breasts she dances with her lower half covered by lace underwear. As she uses her body to seduce her male viewers they bid on her. When the video comes to an end Gaga approaches the highest bidder as he lies in bed awaiting her sexual favors. She refuses to play the role of his sex toy and lights him and his bed on fire. Aside from this sex slave saga, no other cohesive narrative is apparent in the video. The action happens quickly and in the span of five-minutes the video introduces eleven scenes (three of which I have discussed). In the eight remaining scenes, Gaga embodies two different monsters: the wide-eyed woman in the bathtub, and the skeletal woman in the shadows. Gaga does not name these characters; she visually introduces them to her audience.

Between the scenes of the dancing white zombies, a crazed Gaga appears in a giant white bathtub. Her torso remains hidden behind the thick white porcelain, but her face and her arms reveal her monstrosity. Her fingers twitch at an inhumanly rapid rate and her eyes look digitally re-mastered to appear ghoulish, wide, and odd. Perhaps this character represents one of the undead’s monstrous qualities, the blissful loss of the human mind. The video periodically jumps back to this scene and, at one point, shows two females dragging the crazed Gaga out of the
bathtub. The two women each wear a one-piece latex dress that clings to their waists and exaggerates their hips. As they pull her out of the tub the women reveal that Gaga is wearing a two-piece ensemble made of the same material. Because of the fabric’s see-through nature, Gaga covers each of her nipples with a cross of white tape. As the women drag her out of the bathtub they turn her back towards the camera and strip her of her top. They then proceed to force clear liquid down her throat. Gaga refuses to swallow the liquid and spits it in their faces. In the rapid sequence of events Gaga seems to be telling her fans that she will not abandon her eccentric or crazy aesthetic in order to fit in with mainstream culture. She will not give in to her co-stars' violence; she will remain unchanged, monstrous, and in her bathtub where she can freely express the creepy nature of her art.

The final monster that appears in the video reeks of decay. In accordance with the theme of undead monsters, this character appears in the video between scenes of Gaga seducing men at the auction, writhing in the bathtub, and dancing as a zombie. The camera angle, the lighting, and careful editing work together to create the illusion of a taller, thinner, and bonier Gaga. In a pair of extremely high heels she appears to be at least six feet tall and hunches over an exposed spine that gets increasingly thick at her upper back. Bent over by the weight of her upper body, Gaga uses her hands to express movement. A semi-circle of metal bars surround her and when she decides to move her body, she must cling to the metal to support her imbalanced frame. On top of her head she wears a half-bat half-snake porcelain monster that is frozen with its mouth wide open and fangs exposed. Lady Gaga takes the often-eroticized image of the deathly thin female body and turns it into something disturbing. With this monster, the crazed bathtub monster, and her fleet of zombies, Gaga takes the fear of love and turns it into a provocative music video. She beautifies the zombie, a monster that captures everything that is unacceptable
about the human body, in an attempt to reinforce the message her lyrics send: “I want all the most disgusting parts of you that you think nobody will love” (“Lady Gaga – Explains Bad Romance”).

Gaga’s choice to emphasize zombies in her video can be seen as an expression of her desire to communicate a message of equality. Of all the monsters that exist, the zombie is the least prejudiced. As Kevin Alexander Boon points out in his essay, “Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film, and Culture,” “Like physical death, zombies show no favoritism and exercise no judgment” (35). The zombie does not look at its victim and think twice about devouring him/her; it sees all living flesh as appealing. Boon goes on to argue that, “[b]ecause they are the personification of corruption, zombies cannot themselves be corrupted. The army of the undead does not vanquish the enemy, it recruits them. To succumb is to become, and once you have become a zombie, self is lost irrevocably to the other” (35). Gaga does not want to consume her fans, she wants to liberate them and help them achieve self-acceptance. Through the figure of the monster, and in this case, the zombie, she destroys the very construct of the self and offers her fans a different angle to access contentment. Instead of tailoring her identity to an acceptable form, Gaga embraces the monstrous loss of self as a means to detach from the judgment inherently programmed into the psyche.

In the remaining videos that accompany The Fame Monster, Gaga plays the roles of the criminal and the dominatrix rather than the monster. Partnering once again with director Jonas Åkerlund who put out a casting call through an adult entertainment company Gaga explores her sexuality in the “Telephone” music video (Callahan 210). Co-starring Beyoncé Knowles, the video starts inside an eroticized female penitentiary and ends with Beyoncé and Gaga on the run after committing mass murder. Critic Caryn Ganz, writing for Rolling Stone, calls the video, “a
nine-minute-and-thirty-second mash-up of lesbian prison porn, campy sexploitation flicks and insidery winks at the two divas' public personas” (Ganz n. pag.). In “Telephone,” Gaga utilizes a plethora of odd costumes such as a full body cat suit, a blue telephone headpiece, and an outfit made entirely out of caution tape, but none of them reference the figure of the monster. In the “Alejandro” music video Gaga finds herself swept up in a choreographed orgy that celebrates the beauty of the human body. She takes her sexuality and mixes it with religious symbols by wearing a latex nun outfit and shooting a scene where she swallows a rosary. *New York Daily News*’ Anthony Benigno says it all with the title to his review of the film: “Lady Gaga ‘Alejandro’ video turns up the S&M heat with fetish imagery and a ravaged nun.” With “Alejandro” Gaga continues to explore her sexuality but without any monstrous undertones.

Like most pop stars, Gaga subverts conventional boundaries by posing as the provocateur that shocks and confronts her audience. In the "Telephone" and "Alejandro" videos she demonstrates this propensity by stretching the boundaries of acceptable representations of sexuality and spirituality, but without enacting the monster. Gaga’s work does not always fit nicely into the three thesis statements outlined in “Monsters: A Cultural Obsession.” She carefully selects when to reference the monster in an attempt to avoid categorization. If she constantly inhabits monstrous characters she runs the risk of falling into a predictable pattern. By appearing in videos as the sexy ingénue devoid of monstrous undertones, she evades categorization. Gaga establishes with these videos that the transgressive figure of the monster is not the only vehicle through which she celebrates stigmatized identities or exposes her feminine flesh. She accomplishes both of these feats without reconstructing her body to appear more monstrous. As Johnny Morgan points out, “As she has said about herself, Gaga evolves very quickly and no matter who you are, by the time you think you’ve got her defined and think that
you know Gaga, she’s moved on” (156, original emphasis). Like the monster, Gaga somehow always manages to escape definition. Gaga titles her album *The Fame Monster* and her tour the Monster Ball, but does not always inhabit a monstrous character. Instead she evokes the figure of the monster with specific lyrics and costume pieces, and a message she writes to her fans.

Along with the deluxe edition of *The Fame Monster*, Gaga released the “Manifesto of Little Monsters.” This document describes the symbiotic relationship that Gaga believes she shares with her fans. She composed the manifesto as a letter, the first paragraph of which reads:

> There's something heroic about the way my fans operate their cameras. So precisely and intricately, so proudly, and so methodically. Like Kings writing the history of their people. It's their prolific nature that both creates and procures what will later be perceived as the "kingdom." So, the real truth about Lady Gaga fans, my little monsters, lies in this sentiment: They are the kings. They are the queens. They write the history of the kingdom, while I am something of a devoted Jester.

(“Manifesto of Little Monsters”)

This document declares that Lady Gaga does not expect her fans to blindly worship her. By casting herself as the Jester, Lady Gaga seems to acknowledge that her fans’ support sustains her existence. She invites her fans to become little monsters (miniature shape shifters) and seems to assert that their devotion not only shapes her career but also dictates its path. But isn’t the Jester a notoriously deceptive figure? How can we trust that Gaga does not use her post as the colorful entertainer to manipulate her fans? With this manifesto Gaga tries to step outside her constantly shifting persona and claim a true self dedicated to serving her fans.

Editor of *Gaga Stigmata*, Meagan Vicks dubs Gaga a Trickster and sees her career as a transgressive act aimed at disarming pop culture. In her article “The Icon and the Monster: Lady
Gaga is a Trickster of American Pop Culture,” Vicks argues that Gaga fools pop culture by using the ambiguous figure of the Trickster: “Like other trickster figures, Lady Gaga continually crosses the borders that structure our knowable world and in doing so, allows something new access into the culture” (Vicks n. pag.). With her manifesto Gaga seems to be placing her fans outside of pop culture, which does not make any sense. Just like Lady Gaga, the machine of pop culture thrives on its consumers. Her manifesto might seem honest but ultimately it is another expression of her subversive attitude towards pop culture. She wants to create a counter movement within pop culture, but she uses the same manipulative tactics that any savvy marketing or advertising company employs: emotional exploitation.

Gaga creates a palpable connection with her fans based on their shared exclusion from conventional society. She manages to convince the majority of her little monsters that an authentic and altruistic Lady Gaga exists. In *Poker Face: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga*, Callahan recalls one fan’s skepticism: “Lady Gaga seems so sincere, he says, but it’s also how sincere she seems that makes him fearful she’s not” (4). She professes that she does not want her fans to feel alone or unwanted. The remainder of the “Manifesto of Little Monsters” expresses this perspective:

> It is in the theory of perception that we have established our bond. Or, the lie, I should say, for which we kill. We are nothing without our image. Without our projection. Without the spiritual hologram of who we perceive ourselves to be, or rather to become, in the future. When you're lonely, I'll be lonely too, and this is the fame. (“Manifesto of Little Monsters”)

Gaga claims she that does not see her fans as puppets she manipulates on the quest for fame, but rather as the reason for her continued struggle with the vicious world of pop culture. In *Lady
Gaga: Inside the Outside she tells Davi Russo, “The biggest surprise to me has been my relationship with my fans. They’ve changed my life. The fans are the thing you can’t learn. They were the instrument in the music that nobody taught me about” (“Lady Gaga: Inside the Outside”). Making this comment, Gaga does not mean to assert that she uses her fans--referring to them as an instrument may be a way of acknowledging their crucial effect in performance--but it is suggestive. During this interview Gaga wears prosthetic cheekbones, elaborate eye make-up, and a two toned wig. She announces with her appearance a slight monstrous identity, but then expects her responses to be read as genuine. She can use the figure of the monster and her shifting persona to transgress cultural boundaries, but it is difficult then to claim Lady Gaga as an authentic self. With the Monster Ball Tour Gaga continues to enact this contradiction as she pairs the figure of the monster with clever speeches designed to evoke an emotional response in her audience that perpetuates an image of authenticity.

In the film, Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden, a camera crew captures footage of Gaga’s concerts from February 21st and 22nd of 2011. The Monster Ball Tour started on November 27, 2009, and ended on May 6, 2011. From November 27, 2009, to January 26, 2010, the show followed a set list consisting only of songs off The Fame and The Fame Monster, but on February 28, 2010, a new set list divided into four acts replaced the original show. The film captures her revised Monster Ball Tour. It starts before the concert begins and reveals Gaga in a vulnerable state. Sitting in front of a mirror she takes off her make-up in preparation for a fresh layer of foundation and masquera as she chats with her make-up artist. She breaks down in tears as she verbalizes the pressure she feels to remain a beacon of hope for her fans: “I just want to be a queen for them and sometimes I don’t feel like one” (Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball). The movie then cuts to Gaga right before she enters the arena.
On YouTube, however, a clip of the entire melt down exits. It picks up where the film leaves off. Gaga continues to express her anxiety to her make-up artist: “It’s not about being a winner for me anymore, you know? It’s about being a winner for all of them” (“Lady Gaga Presents: Gaga Revealed”). Here we see Gaga falling into black and white thinking. She can either be the champion of her fans or a complete disappointment, a superstar or a loser.

In order to snap herself out of her depressed state, Gaga says a prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you so much for the blessings of all of my friends and my family. And thank you for all of the amazing screaming fans that are here tonight. Dear Lord please give me strength to be a winner for all of them and not for myself. Dear Lord remind me to empower not myself, but to empower those around me, because that is my gift. My gift is not self-worship, but my gift is the worship of others. So please help me to be strong, and please help me to know my own strength. Please help me to be brave, Lord. Dear God, give me courage. Do not let me give into those feelings. Do not let me give into my own insecurities. Allow me to walk in your light. Allow me to live and breathe and sing and dance for all the dancers on that stage, for the band, for the music, and for you. Amen. (“Lady Gaga Presents: Gaga Revealed”)

Gaga resists the urge to submit to her feelings of inadequacy and instead looks to a higher power for guidance, strength, and clarity. This moment of devotion evaporates as she lifts her head and looks straight into the camera and says, “Now I’ve got some shit to do!” (“Lady Gaga Presents: Gaga Revealed”). Aware of the camera, Gaga abruptly shifts from the humbled and bewildered Lady Gaga into the spunky and confident Lady Gaga. Her rapid emotional swing certainly speaks to the fact that she is human, but it also rudely points out that her entire display occurs in
front of a camera lens. Her prayer echoes the message found in the “Manifesto of Little Monsters” and attempts to show viewers that Gaga sees herself as an artistic advocate and not as a greedy self-centered celebrity. This raises an important question: Does Lady Gaga possess an authentic identity or is this all one incredible act? The truth is, as long the little monsters believe in Lady Gaga, it does not matter. Their unyielding faith supports her career and the potentially faulty foundation on which it rests.

While the existence of a core Gaga remains a dicey subject, a pattern in her work does emerge that suggests her sincere interest in marginalized people. In The Fame Monster Gaga seems obsessed with her ability to defy the monsters she encounters as a pop star. And with Born This Way she becomes fascinated with the monster’s ability to protect. She does not don a monstrous guise in order to threaten, frighten, or devour but rather to create a sanctuary for her fans. Throughout the Monster Ball, as captured in Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden, she directly addresses her little monsters in an effort to make them feel accepted. After she performs the third song on her set list, Lady Gaga speaks to her crowd: “the best thing about the Monster Ball is that I created it so that my fans would have a place to go, a place where all the freaks are outside and I lock the fucking doors!” (Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour). She goes on to tell them, “It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or how much money you’ve got in your pocket because tonight, and every night after you can be whoever it is you want to be” (Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour). For the two-hour duration of the concert she creates a community that projects an extremely positive message. This space is not only dominated by Gaga’s encouraging words but by a constant stream of monster references.
Cloaked in costumes ranging from exoskeleton garb to hairy werewolf capes, Gaga parades the figure of the monster across her body and her stage. For the tour Gaga created a narrative that follows Lady Gaga and her back-up dancers on their quest to find the Monster Ball. She performs nineteen different numbers and during the sixth piece, “LoveGame,” she enters the stage in a see-through latex nun outfit that she pairs with an exaggerated nun’s habit. On her left hand she wears a large skeletal white claw that is covered in blood. Since she changes her outfits over a dozen times during the concert Gaga does not have enough time to completely hide her human figure. Instead she decorates her body and her back-up dancers in monstrous accessories and outfits. During this particular number her back-up dancers wear boney white headdresses that echo the skeletal motif introduced by her monster claw.

For performance of the song “Monster,” Gaga drapes her body in a thick black furry cape that displays three plastic werewolf heads. Her back-up dancers wear shaggy black pieces that suggest that they represent the werewolf Gaga describes in her lyrics. The song tells the story of Gaga’s tormented relationship with a man: “He’s a wolf in disguise/ But I can’t stop staring in those evil eyes . . . He tore my clothes right off/ He ate my heart then he ate my brain” (Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour). Gaga uses her back up dancers to perform the violence her lyrics describe. During the chorus of the song the dancers gather around Gaga and simulate her demise. Hidden behind her dancers, Gaga descends under the stage in a trap door and covers herself in blood. Her back-up dancers flee as Gaga pops back onto the stage. Stripped of her monstrous cape Gaga staggers around as the dancers pretend to feed off her. Gaga does not attempt to fight them off, but ends the song with her hand raised in the air and her head held high.
Before Gaga and her back-up dancers reach the Monster Ball, they must slay the fame monster. As she prepares for her performance of “Paparazzi,” Gaga enters a dimly lit stage accompanied by two of her dancers who quickly depart, leaving her standing alone as a giant deep-sea monster emerges behind her. With a loud growl it announces its presence and Gaga turns around and screams as she says, “Oh no! It’s the monster. It’s the fame monster!” (Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour). With giant illuminated teeth this monster attempts to devour Gaga as she sings her hit song. Fog surrounds the base of the creature. When the camera zooms in on the stage it appears that it is a giant puppet being manipulated by a group of people wearing full body black ensembles. As she sings, Gaga encourages her fans to help her vanquish this beast. She tells them, “Thank you so much for being so brave. You look so amazing. Now help me kill him. Get your cameras out. Take that monster's picture” (Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour). Gaga approaches the monster and becomes entangled in one of its large yet sparkly tentacles. The monster rips off her a layer of her outfit leaving her in a green one-piece leotard. Concealed by the monster, Gaga goes beneath the stage and two men place an electronic bra and pair of underwear on her body. She emerges with sparks flying from her chest and her crotch as the monster slowly dies. Once Gaga has successfully slaughtered the monster, she can now take her fans to the Monster Ball. She leaves the stage and returns to sing “Bad Romance” and, with the screams of a crowd craving an encore, she comes out one more time to perform “Born This Way,” the leading song of her next album, Born This Way.

By defeating the fame monster Gaga empowers herself and her fans. Gaga reinforces the encouraging message that she preaches throughout the concert with the lyrics to “Bad Romance” and “Born This Way.” Gaga begins to morph into a savior figure that uses lyrical, cinematic, and theatrical outlets to maintain the safe haven she creates during the Monster Ball. Throughout the
concert she tells her fans, “put your paws up!” She extends her arm in the air and curls her hand into a claw, creating a symbol of rebellion, celebration, and acceptance. Ignited by her call to dance, her fans jump up and down to the beat of her music with their paws in the air. Fueled by her fans’ energy and the rush of the Monster Ball Tour, Gaga will go on to create her next album, *Born This Way*. 
Chapter 6

The Liberating Mother Monster

In *Born This Way*, Lady Gaga uses monstrosity to transgress cultural boundaries, to glorify stigmatized identities, and to allure her audience with her exposed feminine flesh. She does this most prominently with her lyrics to “Born This Way” and the music video they inspired. With the monstrous characters that she inhabits throughout the music video, and with the manifesto prelude that introduces her as Mother Monster, Lady Gaga embraces her position as a pop idol and demands a cultural revolution. The other music videos and songs off the album support the vision she creates with this piece but do not overtly deal with the figure of the monster. With “Born This Way,” Gaga creates an anthem to her little monsters that advocates acceptance and stimulates change. Gaga not only continues to produce powerful art, she goes on to create The Born This Way Foundation, an organization that empowers youth. This organization and its inspiring cause suggest that Lady Gaga is more than just a pop diva; she is a progressive artist capable of disrupting a suffocating cultural system.

With the lyrics to “Born This Way,” Lady Gaga unflinchingly declares her acceptance of people with stigmatized identities. Society tells us that people of certain races, genders, sexual orientations, income levels and abilities have the power to ostracize and condemn us. Lady Gaga tells us with this song that people should not be ashamed of stigmatized identities or allow them to bar the way to happiness. In “Monsters: A Cultural Obsession,” we visited these lyrics, but let’s take another look at them. The bridge of the song captures her message:

Don’t be a drag, just be a queen/ Whether you’re broke or ever green/ You’re black, white, beige, chola descent/ You’re Lebanese, you’re orient/ Whether life’s disabilities/Left you outcast, bullied, or teased/ Rejoice and love yourself today/
‘Cause baby you were born this way/ No matter gay, straight, or bi, / Lesbian, transgendered life/I’m on the right track baby/ I was born to survive. (‘Born This Way’ Born This Way).

Lady Gaga vehemently opposes society’s definition of normal and instead of perpetuating the taboos associated with these stigmatized individuals, she venerates their abject identities. During the video she injects an echoing silent whisper: “Safety in numbers” which reinforces her inclusive sentiment (Lady Gaga “Born This Way” YouTube). She not only successfully creates a new community with this song and its music video, but she also creates an important concept: the battle against intolerance and injustice cannot be won by individuals fighting alone; we must stand together. She uses her lyrics as an invitation to her fans to transcend suffocating cultural categories, to reject the continued dismissal of people on the basis of their gender, race, sexual orientation, disabilities, or income level.

In “Born This Way,” Lady Gaga introduces her viewers to the Mother Monster. Lady Gaga’s Mother Monster looks vaguely human and extremely feminine, but more importantly she possesses a variety of monstrous attributes. Lady Gaga applies prosthetic pieces to her face and her body to create a uniquely shaped maternal form. She modifies her cheekbones and heightens the angle of her shoulder blades so as to create an alien-like appearance. Her clearly monstrous appearance is furthered by two jutting nodes that rest above her brow and look like horns. She wears make-up that attempts to disguise her human features by neutralizing her eyebrows and lips and allowing the prosthetic elements of her face to remain in full focus. Dark eye shadow covers both of her eyelids and, combined with her heightened angular cheeks, gives her a gaunt appearance. Completing the look, a blue eyeball rests at the edge of the Mother Monster’s chin,
making her appear as an inverted Cyclops. With this monstrous face, Lady Gaga creates a character that vehemently resists definition.

The Mother Monster’s look extends beyond her face and continues with an elaborate costume that further confuses her identity. A cone shaped wig rests on top of her head and is decorated with two strips of rhinestones. One strip wraps around the base of her forehead and the other wraps around the wig at about three quarters of its height. A vertical black line darkens the center of the wig and intersects with the horizontally situated rhinestones to create what looks like a cross. This gives the Mother Monster an “Born This Way” an interesting religious undertone that occurs again in the beginning of the song when Gaga sings: “It doesn’t matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M/ Just put your paws up/ ‘Cause you were born this way, baby” (Lady Gaga, “Born This Way” Born This Way). With this lyric, Gaga distinguishes between him, a generic word that refers to a male, and HIM, a capitalized version of that word that potentially alludes to a powerful religious figure, God. With this lyric she’s declaring that she, unlike the culture that surrounds her, does not discriminate or judge, but unconditionally accepts the individuals that society rejects. She creates an alternate universe run by Mother Monster.

In his article “A Religion Against Itself: Lady Gaga, God, and Love,” Peter Kline reinforces the claim I’ve made about “Born This Way” and its religious undertones. He makes an intriguing point; later on in the song Gaga sings the lyric: “I’m beautiful in my way/ ‘Cause God makes no mistakes” (“Born This Way” Born This Way). He connects the two lyrics and ties them to an overarching concept of unconditional love: “‘It doesn’t matter if you love him / or capital H-I-M / . . . God makes no mistakes.’ ‘God,’ accordingly, is not some Big Other who demands our servile obedience, but simply and sheerly the Freedom to love [each] other” (Kline n. pag.). Lady Gaga uses the Mother Monster and this lyric as a vehicle to express her benevolent
message to her fans. She takes on a monstrous identity in order to become the maternal protector who creates a safe and loving environment that does not carefully select its members. She does not recreate Foucault’s carceral; she turns it upside down. Instead of using a system that relies on surveillance and observation to purify its members, she replaces it with a compassionate authority figure that celebrates differences.

The beginning sequence of her “Born This Way” music video allows her to deconstruct the hatred that perpetuates discrimination and intolerance. The video begins with a black screen dominated by an extremely powerful symbol: a pink triangle. The pink triangle in this video acts as a frame that introduces and concludes the action. Initially the pink triangle appears upside down but when the video ends, the image of the triangle returns in the upright position. The downward pointing pink triangle was used as a badge in Nazi Germany’s concentration camps to identify homosexual men. It served as a visual symbol of shame that condemned anyone who was forced to wear it. By starting her video with this image, Gaga positions herself squarely in opposition to this symbol and its cruel message. Inverted, the once revolting pink triangle becomes an international symbol of gay pride that celebrates the gay rights movement. Lady Gaga ends her video with this symbol and by centering her music video around this symbol announces her acceptance of non-heterosexual sexuality.

As the video begins, a sparkling unicorn enters the pink triangular frame for a few seconds before another pink triangular frame descends on top of this image. This second pink triangular frame contains the first of Lady Gaga’s monstrous characters in this video. As the sequence progresses the camera descends on this image as it comes to life revealing Lady Gaga as the Mother Monster. The initial image that appears allows the viewer to see the back of Lady Gaga’s head, which is adorned with a plastic human mask that looks like a plastic version of the
Mother Monster’s face. This establishes Lady Gaga as some type of two-headed monster and introduces the theme of monstrosity that recurs in this video.

Aware of the myriad references that appear in this video, MTV writer James Montgomery published an online article that breaks down “Born This Way” into a convenient list of pop culture references. He attributes the two-headed monster to the Greek god, Janus (Montgomery n. pag.). His entry on Janus reads as follows: “The two-faced Roman god of gates, doorways, beginnings and endings and time. At the very beginning of ‘Born This Way,’ Gaga’s Mother Monster features two faces, and given the whole ‘rebirth’ concept behind this video, that seems less than coincidental” (Montgomery n. pag.). While Montgomery lacks scholastic finesse, he does make an astute observation. “Born This Way” does contain a theme of rebirth (which I will address in a moment) but her double-headed monster represents far more than an adaptation of Greek mythology’s Janus. Since Janus was a Roman god, theoretically both of his heads would have been functional. In “Born This Way,” Lady Gaga only displays a double-headed character with one functional head. I believe this signals her attempt at creating a monstrous persona and not her ploy to insert as many cultural references into her music video as possible.

The Mother Monster is not only a character that Lady Gaga created for this music video, but also one of Lady Gaga’s alter-egos that maintains a close relationship with her fan base. In “Born This Way” she not only introduces the Mother Monster, but also reveals “The Manifesto of the Mother Monster”; her visually stunning character has a very clear message. During the first two and a half minutes of the video Gaga recites the manifesto in voice-over. She uses the manifesto as both a declaration of her identity and as a creation myth. The manifesto dictates the action in the beginning of the video and helps explain the odd environment Mother Monster and
her progeny inhabit. She uses the first few lines of the manifesto to introduce herself and her environment: “This is the manifesto of Mother Monster: On G.O.A.T, a Government Owned Alien Territory in space, a birth of magnificent and magical proportions took place” (“Born This Way” YouTube). Gaga establishes her location, somewhere in space, and identifies the character on the screen as Mother Monster. Her choice to situate her video in this liminal place allows her to take more creative and monstrous leaps throughout the rest of the video. She extricates herself and her monstrous characters from a familiar cultural setting and places them all in a limitless frontier where anything can happen. This location reflects her sentiments about identity, and allows her the freedom to share the message embedded in her manifesto.

Once she establishes her environment, Gaga enacts the birth of a new race. Before she does that, she describes the birth: “But the birth was not finite. It was infinite. As the wombs numbered and the mitosis of the future began, it was perceived that this infamous moment in life is not temporal, it is eternal” (Lady Gaga “Born This Way” YouTube). With this statement, Gaga acknowledges the need for her new race to extend beyond our concept of time into a higher level of existence, one that can outlast the decaying human form. With this idea in place, she begins the process of engendering a new race: “And thus began the beginning of the new race, a race within the race of humanity, a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment but boundless freedom (“Born This Way” YouTube). With this birth, Gaga loosens the firm grip that normalizing factions hold over individuals. She challenges the system by creating within it a new form of human being that exists within the system while not being of the system. In other words she breaks down the system from within, creating a powerful source of acceptance that cannot succumb to society’s dominating prescriptions for acceptable behavior.
By creating a new race and becoming their Mother Monster, Gaga takes on the role of the maternal champion who will protect and love anyone whom society rejects. Through her monstrosity she engenders a new community that welcomes society’s outcasts: the society’s monsters. I believe she also uses this creation myth to debunk the idea of homosexuality or a queer identity as a biological defect. In spite of figures like Lady Gaga, an undercurrent of homophobia continues to run rampant in our society. Some members of our society not only see homosexuality, or non-heterosexual sexuality, as a behavioral defect; they view it as a biological monstrosity that occurs in the womb. Type the words “homosexuality as biological defect” into a Google search bar and over one million hits will pop up on the screen. Scientific forums, religious websites, newspaper articles and a plethora of online debates will emerge. The people who publish and post on these websites do not necessarily convey anything close to the truth, but they do propose a horrifying ideology that frames non-heterosexual orientation as a scientific anomaly that requires change. One blogger, who identifies her/himself as secretsmile states: “The fact remains homosexuals are abnormalities in the species” (“Homosexuality = genetic defect”). This individual’s opinion unfortunately persists beyond the world of the Internet; a segment of our population believes that homosexuality is monstrous. With her creation of a new race, Lady Gaga provides a home for those who become the subject of such ridiculous and extremely heated assertions.

While describing his first thesis about monsters, Cohen makes a similar observation about monstrosity, gender identity, and biology. He states that, “The difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities elicits an array of anxious responses throughout culture, producing another impetus to teratogenesis” (Cohen 9). Teratogenesis is the process in which defects are created in an embryo or fetus. Cohen argues that biological deviation defines
the difference between human beings and monsters, and with the above statement extends that observation and applies it to people with purportedly abnormal gender identities. He implies that the anxiety their abnormality generates inspires society to label them as deformed. Instead of widening the definition of normal, he observes that human beings tend to bend scientific knowledge in order to account for this deviance. The previous statement made by the secretsmile blogger gives his observation credence. Lady Gaga addresses this issue by creating her own race of human beings who do not have to suffer the misconceptions of close-minded individuals.

After introducing the Mother Monster, the rest of Gaga’s video introduces four different monstrous characters and their respective environments. Each one of these monsters possess the same prosthetic facial features and peaked shoulders that Mother Monster exhibits, but each adapts their appearance to perform a different character. I will describe each of these monstrous characters in keeping with the video’s sequence. As her pre-recorded voice recites the beginning lines of the Manifesto of Mother Monster, the camera shows the birth of her new race. Slimy blue heads (that look exactly like the plastic mask that sits at the back of Mother Monster’s head) emerge from between her legs. As Gaga’s voice recites, “and thus began the beginning of a new race” (Lady Gaga “Born This Way” YouTube) a second scene unfolds. In this new environment Lady Gaga again appears, but this time as a member of the new race surrounded by rows of plastic heads. She stands in the center of the screen with a thick sheet of either glass or plastic that has a hole carved out of it for her neck, and which separates her head from the rest of her torso. She wears a cropped platinum blonde wig and wears a flesh toned one piece that covers her from the base of her neck down to her ankles. Thin pieces of black fabric decorate this bland ensemble; a single black line crosses over each of her nipples and a third black line runs down the center of her pelvis. With this character Lady Gaga identifies herself as a new born monster,
a young member of her new race. She begins to break the rampant theme of intolerance that she observes by inserting herself at the center of her judgment-free community, although at this point it only consists of plastic heads.

The next environment that Gaga introduces helps the viewer visualize the rest of her Manifesto. This black and white environment is revealed as viewers hear the next few lines of her manifesto: “But on that same day, as the eternal mother hovered in the multiverse, another more terrifying birth took place: the birth of evil” (“Born This Way” YouTube). The video shifts focus away from the Mother Monster and her offspring and zeroes in on her malevolent counterpart, a character (also played by Lady Gaga) who gives birth to evil. This character’s hair cascades down and around her face disguising her connection to the Mother Monster and newborn Gaga monster. Unlike the other two characters, this one possesses a prop, a large shiny black gun. She fires this gun off as her evil offspring surfaces and Gaga’s voice-over finishes the Manifesto: “And as she herself split in two, rotating in agony between two ultimate forces, the pendulum of choice began its dance” (Lady Gaga “Born This Way” YouTube). In this section of her manifesto Gaga resists the urge to create a whimsical picture of love and euphoria, and instead chooses to live in a more oppositional space that recognizes the inescapable reality of good and evil.

She acknowledges this struggle with the last few lines of her manifesto, ending in a poignant question: “It seems easy, you imagine, to gravitate instantly and unwaveringly towards good. But she wondered, ‘How am I supposed to protect something so perfect without evil?’” (“Born This Way” YouTube). With this character and this ending to her manifesto, Lady Gaga taps into the dualistic nature of both human beings and the monster. She perhaps hints with this question why the Mother Monster must have two heads; she cannot perform her maternal
function without the ability to ferociously defend her children. With this section of the video and her manifesto, Lady Gaga offers not only to become the champion of stigmatized identities, but also to defend them by tapping into the other part of her Mother Monster’s nature.

Once the manifesto ends, the video abandons its black and white tint and descends on a sea of scantily clad human beings who all bear the same prosthetic shoulders and facial features of the previously described monsters. They kneel on all fours and as the beginning beats of “Born This Way” overpower the manifesto’s musical underscoring, the third monstrous Lady Gaga character enters the scene. As the opening lines of the song are heard she puts her hand up in the air and then joins the rest of the individuals on the floor in a kneeling position. Together they rise up and start to perform the song. This character looks the most human; she does not have an elaborate costume that covers her flesh. This monstrous character wears a very skimpy black two-piece bathing suit that allows both her butt cheeks to be proudly on display. Thick black eye liner defines her eyes and helps distract from the prosthetic pieces that reshape her face. Unlike the other monstrous characters in the video, Lady Gaga uses this character and her body to attract viewers and keep them interested in the rest of her video.

The final monster that Gaga introduces is a zombie-inspired character that appears in a metal containment room with a male counterpart; I will refer to her as Zombie Gaga. This environment gets introduced in the video once the song reaches its halfway point with the lyrics: “Give yourself prudence/ And love your friends/ Subway kid rejoice the truth” (“Born This Way” Born This Way). As the video continues the camera randomly switches between the Mother Monster, her child, the monster I’ve just described, and Zombie Gaga. The man who appears in the containment room with Zombie Gaga is the same figure who earlier in the video played the part of the evil that Mother Monster’s counterpart produced. Zombie Gaga wears a
black tuxedo and intricate black and white make-up that mimics her male counterpart’s deathly look. She wears a pink wig tightened into a high ponytail that accentuates her playful femininity, making her monster more accessible.

The actor who plays Zombie Gaga’s son heightens the message at play in this scene; his name is Rick Genest. Unlike Gaga, Genest can never escape his Zombie look because it is inked into his skin. Rick Genest is a Canadian native who Lady Gaga’s fashion designer, Nicola Formichetti, discovered while perusing facebook (Genest). Genest grabbed Formichetti’s attention because eighty percent of his body is covered in tattoos. Genest uses his body to express his artwork and in this video allows Lady Gaga to mimic his visceral “depiction of a body decomposing—complete with flesh eating insects” (Genest). Genest is most commonly known as “Rico the Zombie Boy” and certainly represents an individual who does not conform to society’s definition of normal (Genest). He exposes his tattooed body for Lady Gaga in “Born This Way” and allows her to take on his allegedly offensive appearance. Once the song begins, the video jumps between the monsters I’ve described and their environments. During the sections of the video that jump to this scene, Genest remains still as Zombie Gaga dances around him with sexual gesticulations. She touches herself and rubs up against his body indicating that his supposedly ugly and terrifying person is in fact sexually attractive.

With the remaining videos created for this album, Gaga continues to play the role of the seductress, but she mutes the monster references. In “Yoü and I” Gaga introduces two more characters, one of which alludes to the figure of the monster: Yuyi the mermaid. Gaga wears a restrictive mermaid tail and prosthetic gills to communicate this character. During the scenes in the video in which Yuyi appears, Gaga gyrates in a bathtub full of water as her lover holds an oxygen mask over her face. The theme of the video, as the title suggests, revolves around
relationships. Instead of reinforcing the idealized formula for happiness and marriage, Gaga displays a more realistic vision of love: a somewhat violent codependency that transgresses the laws of nature. She also appears in the video as Jo Calderone, her male alter ego, and creates an edited scene in which she kisses herself. This display is not monstrous, but rather shocking and narcissistic.

Gaga continues to shock with her “Judas” video by using religious iconography to style her deviance. With the lyrics, she makes her confession: “In the most biblical sense I am beyond repentance/ Fame hooker prostitute wench vomits her mind/ But in the cultural sense I just speak future tense/ Judas kiss me if offended/ Or wear ear condom next time” (“Judas” Born This Way). These lyrics and the music video subvert cultural expectations, but without the aid of a monstrous motif. The final video off the album, “Marry The Night” continues to shock without beckoning to the figure of the monster. Gaga begins the video lying on a gurney as two nurses wheel her into what appears to be a hospital. Gaga delivers a monologue as the video begins. In it, she explains her creative impulses:

When I look back on my life it’s not that I don’t want to see things exactly as they happen, it’s just that I prefer to remember them in an artistic way. And truthfully the lie of it all is much more honest because I invented it. Clinical psychology tells us arguably that trauma is the ultimate killer. Memories are not recycled like atoms and particles in quantum physics. They can be lost forever. It’s sort of like my past is an unfinished painting. I must fill in all the ugly holes and make it beautiful again. It’s not that I have been dishonest. It’s just that I loathe reality. (“Marry The Night” YouTube)
Gaga does not explain the trauma she refers to or the lost memories she reconfigures, instead she wears a leather outfit and lights a car on fire as she sings the catchy lyrics to her latest hit. Gaga prefers to live in an artistic world that gives her the freedom to escape reality; perhaps this is why she connects so deeply with the figure of the monster, the epitome of fantasy.

Gaga abandons the visual representation of the monster figure through the majority of the music videos that accompany Born This Way, but in the live performances that promote the album she relies on it. At the 2011 Grammy Awards, Gaga arrived in what she calls “the vessel,” a giant plastic egg. Backstage, she took an oxygen tank into the apparatus and did not emerge from it until it was time for her performance. Her back-up dancers carried her across the red carpet while wearing the prosthetic horns, cheekbones, and shoulder pieces that Gaga created for Mother Monster. When she emerged on stage, she joined her fleet of alien-esque dancers and performed “Born This Way” for a screaming crowd. Her monstrous theme lends itself to intriguing live performances that mesmerize her audience and reinforce the message she sends with her lyrics and her music videos. Gaga does not just sit behind a camera screen and declare her sentiment towards stigmatized identities, she translates both her monstrous look and her benevolent message into an effective live performance.

Lady Gaga doesn’t just use her singing voice and her music videos to her communicate her altruism, she actively engages in affecting cultural change. Partnering with her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, she has created the Born This Way Foundation, an organization that, “was founded in 2011 to foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated. The Foundation is dedicated to creating a safe community that helps connect young people with the skills and opportunities they need to build a braver, kinder world” (Born This Way Foundation) Lady Gaga and her mother launched this foundation on February
29, 2012, at Harvard University. With the help of Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra, Gaga explained her foundation, its three pillars and her decision to invest in this project. For the majority of the event Lady Gaga sat center stage and entertained questions from a panel about how she planned to utilize her foundation. She told the crowd, “I don’t believe that one person can change the world. I think that human kind as a whole can change the world” (“Lady Gaga – Born This Way Foundation”). She acknowledged the idealistic nature of her responses, and in a rather comical speech made a poignant point:

I’m obsessed with John Lennon and Yoko Ono. And they would say, “give peace a chance” and the reporters would shove microphones in their faces and say, “explain.” And they would just cuddle, and say, “no.” “But what do you mean give peace a chance?” Give it a chance! It seems so utopian and naive but it’s like a good pop hook. It grabs you right away and makes you want to move. (“Lady Gaga Born This Way Foundation”)

Gaga recognizes the power she has and with her foundation she tries to share her vision of an accepting and loving world. She recognizes that she alone cannot stop the violence, the bullying, or the hatred she observes, but with her celebrity she can raise awareness and ignite a movement capable of cultural reconstruction.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

Before Lady Gaga was the progenitor of Mother Monster, she was Stefani Germanotta, a desperate young woman seeking fame. Armed with relentless determination and talent she sculpted a new identity that now attracts an overwhelming amount of attention. Today, Lady Gaga’s presence in pop culture is undeniable, but six short years ago Stefani was a struggling artist living in a barren apartment on New York’s Lower East Side. No one knew who she was or cared what she was doing. Without her Haus of Gaga, her record label, or an adoring crowd, Stefani was just another dreamer vying for attention. Despite her claims that she was destined to become a star, Gaga’s path to international notoriety was not clear-cut or inevitable, but rather a process sculpted by the music industry and some of its key players: talent scouts, record producers, and consumers. We must remember that like the monster, Lady Gaga is an invention that both responds to and comments on the culture that surrounds her.

When Stefani abandoned a prestigious spot at Tisch, she announced her desire to break free from a formulaic academic path. Instead of grooming herself to please her instructors and her parents, she opted for an urban education run by trendy go-go dancing DJ’s like Lady Starlight. Her time away from school allowed her to explore her artistic impulses in a more relaxed setting, but Stefani soon discovered that she could not escape the pressure to fit her creativity into a refined commercial package. If she wanted to find success, Stefani had to modify her performance style and her appearance. In 2006, she began to work with talent scout Wendy Starland and record producer Rob Fusari in an effort to transform her music into a marketable product. They directed her towards dance-driven material and encouraged her to lose weight and hide her unattractive features behind a calculated veil of spectacle. She accepted their
ruthless criticism and immediately set to work on revamping her style. With their help, she created Lady Gaga and a collection of songs that attracted her first record deal.

Gaga joined Island Def Jam’s label, but after three months producer L.A. Reid severed her contract. Reid did not think that he could sell her music or the eccentric look she had cultivated. Discouraged by her failure, Gaga called her mother and retreated to the comfort of her childhood home. She mourned the loss of her first job offer, but refused to admit defeat. Gaga dove into the underground art scene raging down the street from her apartment, and began experimenting with her newfound persona. She spun records with Lady Starlight, lit hairspray on fire, and danced in the face of her failure. Meanwhile, Fusari used his business connections to get her an interview with Interscope records. Gaga wowed this company with her singing and writing abilities, but the executives were not convinced she was attractive enough to be a pop star. Interscope offered Gaga a position as a songwriter; they placed her in the background where they could monopolize on her musical talent without risking capital on her peculiar image. The music industry, a star-generating machine, did not recognize her as viable merchandise. Gaga accepted her position but did not submit to this rejection. She continued to write and perform strong pieces of music, and eventually her passion inspired Akon, a producer within the company, to join her cause. After hearing a song she wrote for the Pussy Cat Dolls, Akon approached Jimmy Iovine, the company’s CEO, and received permission to develop her as a recording artist.

Ever the devious trickster, Gaga managed to infiltrate Interscope and defy the company’s initial decision. She recorded her first studio album, *The Fame*, and climbed to the top of Billboard charts across the globe. Gaga proved not only to be a successful recording artist, but also an innovative performer. With her “Crevette Films,” *Transmission Gagavision*, and curios
props like the disco stick, she seduced her audience. Using Interscope’s resources, Gaga turned her musical talent, her odd style, and her ferocious personality into a commercial success. Interscope launched her career, but Gaga continues to build it through her financial and creative investments. Since her debut onto the pop culture scene, Lady Gaga has become a powerful force that challenges the society that surrounds her. She writes lyrics, designs music videos, and performs concert tours that collectively buck against the systematized environment that she inhabits. In her most powerful subversive acts she aligns herself with the figure of the monster and confronts the injustice she perceives. By tracking her career and its monstrous theme, we can see her philanthropic cause gaining momentum.

Before retracing Gaga’s path to monster-dom, let’s revisit the monsters present in popular culture, Cohen’s monster theory, and the three thesis statements I’ve designed to address Gaga’s monstrosity. From terrifying cannibals like the brainless zombies from AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, to adorable animated creatures like Sulley, the furry giant in Disney’s *Monster’s Inc.*, monstrous characters permeate popular culture. They attract audiences, inspire intriguing storylines, and remain a staple in a standard mediatized diet. Like Lady Gaga, they are figures that thrive in the entertainment world. Because of their persistent presence, they have become the subject of a theory designed to read human culture. Using seven thesis statements, Jeffrey Cohen offers a series of propositions that frames the monster as the key figure embodying social anxiety. Cohen asserts that monsters are elusive figures that communicate an alarming yet alluring identity crisis. By refusing to fall nicely into any of the categories created by human culture, monsters enjoy the freedom to behave in unpredictable ways. According to Cohen, they rest at the edge of systematized societies and “ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions.
Lady Gaga uses her clout to advance the project of reevaluation instigated by the monster. She takes the provocative properties of the monster and applies them to her work in an effort to raise awareness and incite change. We can read Lady Gaga’s career like Cohen reads the monster’s presence in human culture. Throughout her career Lady Gaga celebrates stigmatized identities by glorifying their monstrosity, she transgresses cultural boundaries by reconstructing her body to appear more monstrous, and sexualizes her monstrosity with her alluring feminine flesh. She does not constantly embody the figure of the monster, but when she does she sends a powerful message to her fans that has the potential to ignite a cultural revolution. As a famous celebrity with a constantly shifting persona, Gaga continues to express an altruistic agenda that reproduces what the figure of the monster communicates: the need to reevaluate the arbitrary lines that divide humanity into categories, excluding some and privileging others.

The course of Lady Gaga’s career may appear random. In The Fame she sings about dancing, partying, and being famous. At that time, could she have entered pop culture decorated as the Mother Monster and become the icon she is today? I think not. I believe that she first had to establish herself and her clout before she could begin disseminating her positive social message. If we look carefully, her impulses for cultural change were there alongside her monstrosity, but they were in a muted, almost unrecognizable form. In the introduction to Transmission Gagavision, she blatantly announces her mission: “Stardate 2008: Lady Gaga has been sent to Earth to infiltrate human culture one sequin at a time” (Lady Gaga, “Transmission – Gaga”). No one had a clue what she was talking about then, but four years later seeing her as
Mother Monster and the founder of the Born This Way Foundation, we can understand her intentions. In order to infiltrate something, you have to enter secretly. With her “Crevette Films” Gaga quietly introduces her pop performance art and its subversive nature. As Candy Warhol, she puts a blonde wig on her head, a dark tan on her skin, and attracts an intrigued audience. Since she approaches them under the guise of a pop star, they know up front that her style will be outlandish and her performances shocking. But as she does both of these things, she begins to infuse her work with an unexpected agenda: to liberate.

Gaga creates a twisted storyline that charts her death and subsequent resurrection in her “Paparazzi” music video. The video misses the liberating mark with its offensive jab at disabled bodies, but Gaga pursues its theme as her monstrous persona begins to emerge. She ditches the narrative at play in her “Paparazzi” music video and designs a sacrificial performance for the 2009 VMAs. She parades across the stage, bangs on a grand piano and sings out, “I’m your biggest fan/ I’ll follow you until you love me” (“Lady Gaga Paparazzi Live”). She displays her bloody body to the audience and plays with the nature of her celebrity. Without her fans, her career would evaporate. This causes most performers extreme anxiety and forges in them a constant need to please, but it feeds Gaga’s monstrous persona. A few months after this performance Gaga released The Fame Monster and a document that announces her monstrosity: the “Manifesto of Little Monsters.”

In the “Manifesto of Little Monsters,” Gaga declares herself a Jester and uses this document to forge a powerful emotional bond with her fans. She claims the connection she shares with her little monsters drives her career. By making her little monsters a part of her monstrous identity, Gaga creates the problematic yet very powerful illusion that an authentic Lady Gaga exists. The lyrics to “Bad Romance” reinforce this sentiment: “I want your ugly / I
want your disease / I want your everything as long as its free / I want your love” (Lady Gaga, “Bad Romance” *The Fame*). With both the “Manifesto of Little Monsters” and the lyrics to “Bad Romance,” Gaga expresses her interest in that which society dubs unacceptable. She gives her fans a label that invites them to follow her and occupy a monstrous identity. She does not call them “my socially desirables,” she asks them to embrace their inner freak and to join her in dismantling the society that labels such action deviant.

With the “Bad Romance” music video, Gaga begins to apply her monstrosity to her body, a display that visually supports her lyrical agenda. She uses C.G.I. to re-figure her human form to fit a more intriguing shape. The video cuts between several scenes, and in three of them she inhabits a monstrous character. In the beginning of the video she emerges from a white coffin as a blinded zombie. She then displays a crazed character with digitally enhanced eyes and rapidly twitching fingers. Finally, she appears on screen as a skeletal monster with an elongated and exaggerated spine. With these characters she inhabits the ugly characteristics she sings about, and reinforces an accepting message. Instead of viewing the imperfections of the monster’s body as disgusting or threatening, she sees them as beautiful attributes. By engaging with the figure of the monster, the harbinger of that which society rejects, Gaga encourages her viewers to embrace their flaws.

Gaga continues to use the figure of the monster to send a positive message as she takes *The Fame Monster* and adapts it to the stage. When Gaga describes this record, she explains that each of the new songs (recall that it is *The Fame* paired with 8 new tracks) represents her fear of sex, loneliness, alcohol, death, etc. (“Lady Gaga Returns With 8 New Songs”). During the Monster Ball (as captured by *Lady Gaga Presents the Monster Ball: at Madison Square Garden*), Gaga confronts each of these fears with inventive choreography, heightened theatrics,
and monstrous costumes. After draping herself in monstrous garb like a furry werewolf cape, Gaga brings out a giant monster, the fame monster. Most likely a giant puppet, the fame monster resembles a terrifying sea creature complete with vicious looking teeth and creepy tentacles. Armed with sparking underwear, Gaga slays the monster. With this act, and her concert as a whole, she attempts to free her fans of their insecurities. She tells them, “It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or how much money you’ve got in your pocket because tonight, and ever night after you can be whoever it is you want to be” (*Lady Gaga Presents The Monster Ball Tour*).

Gaga takes this message and turns it into a hit song, “Born This Way.” The lyrics of the song celebrate people regardless of their income level, race, sexual orientation, disabilities, or gender. Gaga pairs her potent lyrics with her most compelling monstrous character, Mother Monster. Using the “Born This Way” music video as a platform, Gaga completes the “Manifesto of Little Monsters” by declaring herself their maternal protector. She displays a series of monstrous characters in her video and gives birth to a judgment-free race of human beings (presumably her little monsters). She introduces the “Manifesto of Mother Monster” and with it a blueprint of a utopian society. She appears to fulfill the mission she announced with the introduction to *Transmission Gagavision*. With her prosthetic horns, elevated cheekbones, and pointed shoulders she looks like the outer space creature sent to infiltrate human culture. Now armed with her Born This Way Foundation, perhaps Lady Gaga can change the world one sequin, one song, and one little monster at a time.

Her career leaves a lasting hopeful impression, but it also raises a series of important questions: Why are we so obsessed with monsters? Why is monstrosity such an effective theme
for Lady Gaga? Will she continue to rely on this motif? And what, after all, do Lady Gaga and her monsters teach us about human culture?

I believe that we create monsters in response to the pressure of living in a systematized society. We live in an environment that often demands us to be perfect beings that do not exhibit any physical, mental, or emotional flaws. The pursuit of this unachievable state of existence creates an underlying tension that we express through the figure of the monster. Our obsession with monsters announces our continued struggle to resolve the imbalance between that which society expects of us, and that which we can achieve. Depictions of disgusting man-eating beasts with no discernible social skills make our flaws appear trivial. The brainless, heartless zombie reminds us that unlike this ravenous beast we possess a fair amount of control over our actions. We enjoy watching monsters parade across movie, television, and computer screens because they allow us to express and alleviate the anxiety of being human in a modern society. We take pleasure in creating monsters because they can come in any shape, size, or color imaginable and offer a clean slate upon which we can experiment.

By classifying herself as a monster, Lady Gaga bypasses societal expectations and gives herself the freedom to evolve. She utilizes the variety that the figure of the monster offers and, with her ability to constantly change, she reaps success. Like the monster, she has established an ability to shape shift, and this attracts viewers. Even if they do not enjoy her music, or call themselves little monsters, people are curious to see what she does next. The interest she creates with her monstrosity shapes her career. In order to maintain her position as a prominent pop artist, she must engender intrigue and controversy. Her decision to sculpt her career with a monstrous theme has allowed her to stay relevant, to establish a powerful bond with her fans, and to justify her protean persona.
Lady Gaga disseminates a positive agenda, but she also reinforces some of the damaging messages she attempts to battle. Gaga declares to her fans that they can be whoever or whatever they want to be, but could Gaga be an affluent pop star without her petite frame or thin body? Her success not only stems from her connection with the monster, but also from the allure of her sculpted body. She escapes the repulsive nature of the monster by exposing her flesh, but this reinforces a perhaps unintentional message: in order to be a successful woman you must be both thin and beautiful. Through the figure of the monster she shares a valuable social agenda, but she cannot escape the contradiction that her beautiful monsters present. Gaga is certainly an intelligent and progressive woman, but she too gives in to societal pressure.

Lady Gaga has firmly demonstrated that no one can predict her next move, but I do not believe that she will be abandoning her monstrous theme any time soon. By dubbing her fans her little monsters, she has set up a dependency on this theme. She could rename them, but I highly doubt she would disrupt the communal bond that she has created. Even if she did suddenly decide to ditch her monstrous persona and the characters it inspires, she would never be able to escape the potential of its resurrection. Like a vampire that has bared its teeth, Gaga has announced her monstrous potential. The vampire can retract its fangs, but it can never escape its potential monstrosity, neither can Lady Gaga. The poster for her next headlining tour, the Born This Way Ball, features a close up picture of Gaga in her Mother Monster garb. Her prosthetic horns and sharp cheekbones proudly rest at the center of an image that appears dark, gothic, and edgy. In a tweet that she sent out on February 6, 2012, Gaga told fans, “To give you a bit of insight on the design of my new tour, the central area within the stage will be known as ‘The Monster Pit’” (Lady Gaga (ladygaga)) It appears that for the duration of her next tour (which begins in South Korea on April 27th) Gaga will continue to invest in her monstrosity.
Lady Gaga continues to rely on this theme because it allows her to effectively comment on the culture that surrounds her. Like the monsters that appear in pop culture, Gaga asks us to reevaluate our society. By examining her work and the function of her monstrosity we can begin to understand the importance of questioning the systems that shape us. Her ascent to stardom allows us to glimpse the mechanics of the music industry and examine our concept of fame. Her pop performance art exposes the exploitive tactics running pop culture, and her monsters encourage us to reconceive the way we both perceive and treat others and ourselves. We learn from her that theater is a medium with the potential to ignite social change.
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