SPENDING TIME IN THE PAST, MAKING MUSIC FOR TODAY:

POST-MARRIAGE EQUALITY AMERICA, VINTAGE, AND NOSTALGIA IN

QUEER FEMALE POP MUSIC VIDEOS

By

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I: Introduction

On June 26th, 2015, the United States Supreme Court declared gay marriage to be legal across the nation, striking down all remaining same-sex marriage bans. Only two days earlier, singer-songwriter and former Disney star Hayley Kiyoko effectively announced her lesbianism to the world with her debut single, "Girls Like Girls." The court's decision in Obergefell v. Hodges marked the moment when many queer people gained the opportunity to live in a world where the possibilities and freedoms of their heterosexual peers were extended to them as well; marriage, adoption, spousal rights, and healthcare were some of many things that LGBTQ+ couples could now access with significantly greater ease. Meanwhile, Hayley Kiyoko's "Girls Like Girls" represented a significant shift in the media landscape in which LGBTQ+ individuals were allowed, encouraged even, to represent their authentic selves through the content they created. Pop music engaged with queerness in a much more open and expressive way, with singers and songwriters exploring queerness in music with an explicitness that has largely been missing from mainstream pop of the past. This study investigates these changes and considers the ways in which the post-2015 media landscape has shifted to accommodate the lived experiences, authentic narratives, and creative output of queer pop artists.

More specifically, this study examines the work of queer women artists. Because the dominant face of the queer community has long been white, cisgender, gay men, the role of queer women in pop is understudied, despite queer women artists' increasingly visibility and distinctiveness from their male counterparts. Certainly, a bias in scholarship exists regarding music and the queer community; while many theorists, for example,

engage with diva worship—the tendency for gay men to identify with and be fans of straight female pop icons like Madonna or Lady Gaga (Jennex 3444) —little work has been done to understand queer female artists and the impacts of their artifacts. This bias leaves a significant gap in queer music theory and leaves female artists and their creations severely lacking the consideration warranted in their work.

Queer women in music have long been leaders in queer resistance and out and proud queer identities. From the subtle lesbian songwriting of Melissa Etheridge, k.d. lang, and Tracy Chapman, to the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s Pacific Northwest, queer women musicians have constantly fought to carve out their own spaces in the industry. Now, newer artists, like Kiyoko, are bringing explicit queerness to mainstream pop. But current scholarship has failed to address the nature of their work in the post-2015 landscape and the ways that their music is not only an industry product, but a cultural one as well. The result is a significant gap in research about queer female experiences in music.

In reading 2015 as a turning point for the queer community, the work of queer artists in the later 2010s represents a rich site for critical analysis of the ripples and aftereffects of the Obergefell decision in America, and by extension the rest of the world. The post-2015 landscape of greater mainstream acceptance has spawned a new trend in queer pop music making. Notably, multiple artists have used queer cultural memory, nostalgia, and vintage aesthetics to guide freer and more authentic representations of their lived experiences—and to show queerness as having been present throughout time.

Vintage and nostalgia[1] act as the conduits through which artists create these reimaginings of the past and explore their identities in a reclamatory way. Music and music videos therefore are platforms upon which such renegotiations may occur, as they offer free and open landscapes with significantly less censorship and homogeneity. Providing audiences with visual and sonic storytelling by way of music and music videos is ultimately an act of engaging with identity through narrative, reclamation, and identity study as tandem practices.

This study engages in case studies of music videos by four queer artists who have employed nostalgia as an aesthetic and thematic technique. Hayley Kiyoko, Janelle Monae, King Princess, and the band MUNA all create music videos with a distinct vintage feel, encouraging audiences to understand queerness as a longstanding identity with rich history as well as a space for community members to grow, reclaim, and heal from painful pasts. This study will consider four distinct works, one from each of these artists, to address the ways that nostalgia is used both as an aesthetic tool and as a method to engage with queerness as a site for healing, reclamation, and authenticity.

All the artists in this study are engaging with queerness in a post-marriage-equality landscape, constructing stories that utilize the past both strategically and hopefully. They all act as cultural leaders in the queer pop industry, using their own experiences as sites for exploration, representation, and community healing. Hayley

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[1] In this study, nostalgia builds upon Svetlana Boym's assertion that "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (Boym 8), and argues that nostalgia is also an attempt to recreate past narratives and use the present as a space to engage with such "return." Vintage is thus the practice of this nostalgic reclamation through the use of media artifacts, aesthetics, and community resistance.

Kiyoko acts as a leader in the realm of queer pop by starring in and directing her own

videos as well as writing all of her songs, ensuring an authenticity in her work through the

representation of her own lived experience (Freeman, C. 1014). King Princess has

dedicated herself to the restructuring of lesbian narrative and encouraging open sexual

desire in queer pop music (Nunn 14).[2] While out as queer, MUNA intentionally keeps all

of their songs gender neutral to encourage readings of their music as love anthems, rather

than specifically queer or straight ones (Savage). Finally, Janelle Monae plays with

cyborg images and futurism as a way to engage with her queerness as an aesthetic and a

tool while also drawing on the aesthetics of vintage and pastness (Sazniawska 38). In

sum, each of the artists in this study engage with queerness and cultural memory in a

twofold way—both as a space for authentic representation of their own lived experiences

and communities, and as a space worthy of study and consideration as culture shifting

artifacts.

The very notion of the queer woman sparks resistance and counterculture within a

heteronormative and patriarchal society as the assumed order is inherently disrupted when

these two controlling bodies are removed from the conversation; queer women engaging

in sexual situations through music thus lean into their otherness and represent it in a

positive way. The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways that queer female

musicians are working in the post-2015 era to rewrite queer histories and pasts in a way

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[2] Lil Nas X, Ashnikko, and Frank Ocean have also incorporated explicit queer sexual desire into their music.

that is authentic, reclamatory, and engages with the queer community. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do contemporary queer women and women-aligned pop artists use visual, sonic, and lyrical aesthetics in their music videos to call back to earlier time periods in order to create feelings of nostalgia for otherwise heteronormatively coded pasts?

RQ2: In what ways do queerness, nostalgia, and artist histories and backgrounds work in tandem to construct an authentic representation of queer intimacy, experience, and identity?

II: Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Nostalgia and Queer Cultural Memory

Cultural memory, in the context of queer history, is one key way which communities can come together and bridge gaps of space, time, and marginalization by wider society. I gesture towards Marita Sturken's definition of cultural memory as "memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning" (Sturken 3).

Queer cultural memory reckons with narratives that have historically painted the past as a normalized, homogenous, and painful experience for queer people. Queer identity is largely a product of history, as early taxonomization and labelling acted as a way to mark the perversion of specific individuals and the decline of "moral" society (Freeman 7). Heteronormative culture is dependent upon a return to morality as a distinct

possibility and, thus, the notion of futurity; queer people, in contrast, do not have the opportunity to look at the future as a real possibility and thus must look to the past to restructure narratives in a way that emboldens the present (Munoz 49). Svetlana Boym argues that "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (Boym 8). Queer cultural history can therefore be regarded through the same lens: an attempt to create narratives that engage not with the supposed perversion and immorality of queer histories, but rather the reclamation that must occur to begin the process of communal healing.

Queer cultural narratives have historically acted as reinforcers of pain and trauma as the default way of "being" in the past. What cultures choose to remember or forget about their pasts is inherently connected to the powers and hegemonies that control the narratives with which individuals are allowed to engage (Freeman 6). These narratives make decisions about

> what will be publicly commemorated and what will not, whose deaths
> are mourned and whose are not, and how history is publicly represented.
> This process of selection and omission ensures that only specific
> historical narratives will become normalized in the popular LGBTQ
> imagination (De Szegheo Lang 232).

Queer histories are thus rooted in sameness, creating narratives that are largely negative, painful, and typically focused only on white queers. Narratives about lesbian bars, for example, have often reduced the prevalence of working-class lesbians of colour in favour of narratives that prioritize white, middle-class women instead (Brown-Saracino 1025).

Creating hegemonic narratives limits who can tell their story, subsequently reducing the chances for positive, diverse narratives to be shared.

Combatting hegemonic queer narratives requires a forceful reclamation of queer pasts, a leaning into and embracing of histories that have long painted the community as harmful or dangerous. Speaking on the hypernormalization of pain and perversion in historical queer narratives, Nishant Shahani argues that "queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects" (Shahani 1220). When the queer community is consistently prevented from moving forward, the past becomes a space for play and reclamation, a safe time period through which narratives can thus be renegotiated. While scholarship has disproportionately focused on gay men, with limited accounts of lesbians, queer people of colour, and trans people (Brown-Saracino 1028), queer artists can reimagine the past, transforming it into a space for reclamation and the diversification of homogenous narratives.

Utopianism and in Queer Pasts

Queer cultural theorists often engage with utopianism as frameworks for contemporary reclamatory narratives of queer pasts. Utopianism in queer theory exists to create future cultural possibilities rather than longing for better pasts; these frameworks act as reimaginings of otherwise limiting social spheres (Munoz 47-48). While Utopianism typically imagines a better or perfect future, queerness often operates as the refusal of futures that have never considered it to be a factor in the first place (Noss 131). Queerness has historically been written out of the futures that heteronormative society

strives for; the nuclear family, binary sex and gender, and tradition are the tenets upon which the future is designed, thus leaving queer people with seemingly no place in the world and times ahead. Utopianism in queer theory is therefore a tool of resistive reimagining, encouraging a renegotiation of the past in forming the future, rather than simply looking forward with no regard for the past.

Imagining utopia creates a space for hopefulness in a hopeless present for many queer people; imagining a world without pervasive homophobia and heteronormativity is a deeply entrenched facet in queer utopian theory (Martin 683). Queer cultural developments in postwar America offer significant examples of the impact of such utopian thinking. In the 1950s, so-called "gaybourhoods" were established across America, creating spaces where queer people could create and live in authentic domesticities, despite a largely restrictive and oppressive society (Cavalcante 1717). Music and dance have also operated as spaces for heteronormativity to be renegotiated, with queer dance halls encouraging the breaking down of gendered roles in favour of freely engaging with art and community. The queer tango scene in the 2000s in Argentina, for example, eliminated the discomfort of finding an opposite-sex partner in the dancehall and invited gender and dance performance that was freer and more accepting of different sexualities and expressions (McMains 63).

Francesca Royster argues that "to be queer – to touch and feel and hear queerness – is to always be propelled into a future, because the present still fails us" (Royster 15). Utopia in queer culture is a method to restructure the painful narratives queer people are often faced with when reaching into the past. Renegotiating queer cultural memory

through utopian theory establishes hope and freedom through historical narratives and provides optimism in otherwise pessimistic pasts. Queerness is therefore a collective identity that can be forged and reforged through utopianism (Martin 675), reaching for past narratives that encourage hope and optimism when seeking to create a queer future.

The Making of Vintage as Nostalgic Practice

The practice of vintage offers opportunities for creating utopic narratives from otherwise negative histories through the reclamation of certain symbols, aesthetics, and behaviours. This understanding of vintage resonates with Svetlana Boym's understanding of nostalgia as both a retrospective and prospective process, with present needs informing what parts of the past we might reach into (Boym xvi). Vintage has long been celebrated as a facet of counterculture and the queer community (Dahl 605), and, yet, nostalgia is often regarded as an unaffordable luxury, a negative practice that keeps individuals stuck in pasts to which they can never return (Boym xiv-xv). Both nostalgia and queerness have been pathologized and condemned as different, dangerous, and threatening to the progress and development of heteronormative society (Boym xviii). But vintage is not a desperate attempt to hold onto a painful past. Rather, it is an aesthetic reclamation of pastness that rewrites or diversifies past narratives, encouraging the use of tools or symbols that were previously not accessible to the queer community. Vintage practice helps turn nostalgia into a positive orientation within the queer community.

Vintage operates as an amalgam of product, aesthetic, consumer desires, and time period (DeLong et al. 23), acting as a tool for representing contemporary narratives and social movements while also looking for similarities or tools from the past. It is a

practical attempt to rediscover the past and the future by redefining past symbols and aesthetics; in the process, it also encourages discussions on the ethics of nostalgia and pastness (Knowles 75-76). In the context of this study, music videos participate in the reclamatory practices of vintage, using nostalgic symbols and aesthetics to represent pastness in contemporary media and redefine histories that have long been painful for the queer community.

Music Videos as Reclamation

Music videos offer an ideal platform for the reclamation and renegotiation of queer narratives. As a short form, low budget medium, they do not have to be funded by major music companies and their subject matter can be less constrained than in film and television. They can function as a straightforward medium through which messages can be easily and authentically conveyed. Online distribution has further reduced barriers to access and encouraged more diverse stories and narratives (Vernallis 19).

Music videos in the age of YouTube offer greater creative freedom for content creators. With online distribution, artists can represent things that might otherwise be censored to meet television and film standards (Dhaenens 533). Thus, modern queer music videos have shifted away from desexualization and innuendo and towards a greater range of authentic and diverse representations of queer desire (Freeman 1008-1009). With wider distribution and access, music videos no longer seek to "sell" music to homogeneous consumer demographics (Vernallis 11). Online distribution therefore enables artists to create music videos with more authentic portrayals of lived experiences and to connect with global audiences and niches.

Music videos are crucial to the construction of minority identities; they do not reify notions of homogeneity but rather provide space for individual artists to represent their lived experiences (Harman 555). They allow for an aesthetic of imperfection and ruggedness, contributing to feelings of nostalgia or realism and offering a greater aesthetic space to play within (Fetveit 200). Music videos are a freer, more authentic space for narrative tellings and retellings to occur, thus allowing marginalized and minority communities the chance to rewrite narratives and make space for themselves in media.

III: Methodology

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the aesthetics and techniques that contemporary queer women and women-aligned[3] pop artists use to create feelings of nostalgia in their music videos. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to consider how queer communities use music to access nostalgia for time periods in which they were previously underrepresented in order to create feelings of queer joy in historically heteronormative time periods.

Critical analysis and case study analysis will be the two methodologies employed in this study to consider how the music, music videos, and artist personas are constructed. Using a case study format, this paper will analyze four music videos from four artists: King Princess's "1950," Hayley Kiyoko's "Girls Like Girls," Janelle Monáe's "Make Me

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[3] I use the terms women and women-aligned in this study for the purpose of accurate representation of the four artists I will be analyzing; 2 of the four artists do not solely identify as women, so the use of women-aligned in this context is an effort to ensure each artist is properly represented in the study. For clarity's sake, this study allows for analysis of any queer individuals that identifies along female lines and is not a binary cis or trans man.

Feel," and MUNA's "Winterbreak." Each artist takes up a different sub-genre of pop, using vastly different visual and sonic aesthetics; this allows for a diverse study of queer women and non-binary artists in contemporary pop. I will be analyzing sound, lyrics, and music video aesthetics for this study; depending on which expressive mode each artist uses most obviously to represent their queerness in their music creation, my main focus – sound, music, or lyrics – will shift.

While fandoms and audiences certainly are critical to the understanding of the social impact of media artifacts, this study will focus on the artists and artifacts themselves. Doing so will allow me to analyze the ways each artifact engages with the stories of the artist and the time period they seek to recreate. Further discussion on limitations and future research will be present in the conclusion.

IV: Historical Frameworks

This section will trace queer history from the 1950s – the setting of the earliest music video – through to the 2000s. In in order to understand the role of vintage in the queer community, it is crucial to interrogate 2015 as a major turning point in the reclamation of tradition, values, and queer relationships. One of the major critiques of the push for marriage equality leading up to the 2015 Supreme Court decision was the fear of the "assimilationist dilemma," in which some activists argued that such intense focus on marriage as the main human rights issue would result not in a win for queer people but rather a slow loss of identity and assimilation into heteronormative society (Bernstein 1944). These concerns, however valid, actively ignore the potential to read the marriage equality fight as a fight to engage with vintage.

Multiple studies have highlighted the greater need for social programs, housing, financial and job stability, and health care access in the queer community (DeFillipis et al. 463); however, the fight for marriage equality has become the monolithic turning point for the mainstream queer rights movement. This shifted focus can thus be read as a turn towards vintage, nostalgia, and a reclamation of a time period and luxury not previously afforded to queer couples in the past. 2015 effectively becomes the proverbial 1950s of the queer community; the ability to get married increases mood and confidence while also making pathways to adoption and child rearing much easier for same sex couples (ACOG 84-85). In this way, 2015 is the moment when vintage becomes interwoven into the lives of queer people across America, as they engaged in acts and life choices that are distinctly traditional and gestured toward a time period – the 1950s specifically – not previously afforded to such a group. The nuclear family, easier access to adoption and marriage, and further spousal protections thanks to the legalization of gay marriage all acts as facets of tradition – specifically 1950s tradition – that are suddenly afforded to queer people with significant ease.

1950s, Postwar America, and the Gaybourhood

The 1950s saw a distinct turn in the American family structure and public acceptability politics. People – White, middle class people, that is – were encouraged to move out into the suburbs in the 1950s, start families, and uphold the nuclear family structure. This narrative tends to underrepresent or entirely ignore queer history, making it hard for many queer individuals to access stories from the 1950s. Thus, queer scholars and individuals faced a sense of urgency in ensuring that queer stories are not lost to time

or intentionally eradicated in favour of the dominant 1950s narrative mentioned previously (Ryberg 123; Doan 116).

Queer historians have recovered histories of how queer communities established "gaybourhoods" and spaces where they would congregate and live as a community (Cavalcante 1717). These neighbourhoods acted to resist oppressive and rigid social structures, as well as the increasing criminalization of queer identities. They have also explored how butchness in postwar America became more normalized following World War II; the new work roles and fashion choices (i.e., the wearing of pants) that the war afforded to women made it easier to engage with these facets of butchness. Butch-femme dichotomies became important expressive styles for working class lesbians, creating distinct lines between women based on how they presented (Faderman 126). Of course, the 1950s was not solely a time of positivity and queer joy. Gay people were seen as deviants and pathologized, forced into therapy and demonized if they resisted these efforts (Faderman 131).

And so, even positive 1950s queer narratives also involve the realities of queer people experiencing intense scrutiny and public hatred—a reality that has shaped the dominant narrative of the time period. Archives of traumatic memories engage with cultural memory as an effort to keep these honest reflections present and authentic with a focus on upholding even the most traumatic of narratives; traumatic memories do not shy away from the more painful histories queer people faced at the time, ensuring that any investigation into the past encourages an understanding of the difficulties, dangers, and complexities that were tied up in the 1950s queer experience (Cvetkovich 242). Reaching

into the 1950s past thus requires an understanding that binary gender and sexuality will always be prioritized in these histories and that queer memories are thus under the constant threat of being lost to time or trapped in pain and pessimism (Freeman 5-6).

1970s and 1980s, The Suppression of Butchness, and The Lesbian Sex Wars

The 1970s and 1980s saw major shifts in the discourse surrounding open queerness and queer rights. The decades served as battlegrounds for queer liberation; the Stonewall riot of 1969, lead primarily by trans women of colour, such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (Jenkins 63) sparked the fires that would increase visibility of activist movements in the 1970s and 1980s. The Gay Liberation Front, for example, was founded in 1969, with chapters in multiple cities across America encouraging openness and resistance against laws and legislations criminalizing homosexuality (Seyforth & Barnes 84). The 1970s spawned a new form of lesbian discourse: lesbian separatism, an apolitical theory which positioned lesbians as inherently oppositional to heterosexual, misogynist culture and encouraged the reclamation of the plights of women by women actors alone (Enszer 182). The lesbian sex wars of the 1980s found themselves borne out of such ideologies as "sex-positive" lesbians and radical lesbian feminists engaged in heated debates over pornography, BDSM sex, and sex work as reinforcers of the patriarchy and therefore reductive in the effort for queer liberation (Chenier 1). The 1970s thus was a key turning point for the gay rights movement.

The 1980s, however, saw the AIDS epidemic sweep through the gay male community, intensifying the political and religious demonization and public scrutiny of gay people. Gay and lesbian bars and clubs remained popular in the communities as

spaces for free expression. However, these bars often were located in dangerous neighbourhoods, and hate-crimes occurred on a regular basis (Hoffman 53). The AIDS epidemic only exacerbated these issues as private healthcare was no longer a possibility and queerness was assumed by virtue of having the illness, forcing many to choose between going back into the closet to avoid the mounting fear of homosexuality across the world (Bell 163) or to embrace their identity and engage with it as a political stance. The 1980s was, in many ways, a halting moment for the queer community due to the increasing danger faced both politically and medically.

Speaking a bit more on the concept of re-closeting for safety in the 1980s, to assume the closet is a facet of queer identity encourages much consideration of the role of assigned deviancy in the presentations and the storytelling of LGBTQ+ people. Eve Sedgewick argues that the closet is an innate feature of the lives of queer people; all queer people, at one point or another, find themselves needing to subdue or conceal their sexualities for fear of unknown reactions (Sedgewick 67-68). Regarding this study, queerness and musicality thus might be thought of as similarly deviant, as equal ways of identifying and being in morally ambiguous or nonnormative ways (Brett et. al 11). The 1970s and 1980s thus offered a strange dichotomy in the history of queerness, both existing as a time of great liberation and visibility but also a period of backlash, where pain, criminalization, demonization, and public scrutiny were extremely present.

During this period, music contributed to community and visibility of queerness as a way of being. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, for example, has been a source of community building, music sharing, and explicit lesbianness since the 1970s

(Cvetkovich & Wahng 138), offering up a possibility for a lesbian separatist utopia as was once desired by radical feminists. Current festivals, such as the Coachella sister festival "Mothership" build off of these histories, to create weekend long community festivals for queer women (Beck 28). Music festivals provide an opportunity to participate in "temporary but annually re-created communities" (Morris 57) and experience a sense of timelessness, a living in and appreciating of physical manifestations of what open queerness might look like. In this way, festivals and other counterspaces offer up queer utopias and free exploratory spaces, where music and community can operate as building blocks for political resistance or authentic self-representation (McConnell et. al 474).

The punk music scene also provided space for sexual explicitness and queer community organizing. "Queercore" punk was born out of a desire to make space within punk for queer women and men to create music that reflected their lived experiences (Shoemaker 298-299). The Riot Grrrl movement similarly resisted mainstream ideologies, providing the freedom for female artists to express their frustration with the music industry and carve out spaces where sexuality, gender, and artistic expression could be proudly displayed (Huber 69-70). In sum, while queer musical practices were certainly marginalized in the past, queer musical spaces *did* exist and continue to be foundational for contemporary queer artists.

1990s and On: Queerness in the Twenty-first Century

The 1990s saw the beginnings of the major push for marriage equality or, as Heather Love argues, an increased push for assimilation and sameness into the

mainstream heteronormative society (Love 53). As queer visibility in the mainstream grew, so, too, did the possibilities for where and how one might be queer. Alternative and underground spaces were important for queer community, as well as a range of music scenes. The suburbs and the underground became sites for both queerness and new musical genres and movements to emerge.

The suburbs are an unexplored site for queerness and queer people to live, explore, and grow. Karen Tongson describes the homogenous image of the postwar suburb as one long since lost to time and how the space has since become a fascinating amalgamation of identities: city and country, small and large, queer and straight (Tongson 34). The suburb, although initially meant to be a nuclear, heteronormative utopia, is inherently muddled and troubled by the increasing out queerness of young people born into the space. Confined to their non-urban sprawls, the teenagers of 1990s engaged with their sexualities in ways that countered the early suburban dream. Thus, the suburbs offered an open space for individual resistance and reworking because even the most minor of struggles or outness inherently disrupted the homogeneity of the postwar suburban dream (Bain and Podmore 1505).

Musicians similarly utilized the suburbs and the underground as a space for change. The West Coast music scene, in particular, was the hub for grunge bands, which had a meteoric rise in popularity in the 1990s. At its core, grunge is music borne out of basements, garages, and bedrooms as recording spaces (Stafford); it is inherently suburban in its make-up and thus disrupts the peace, tranquility, and supposed safety of the traditional suburban space, much like queerness. The Riot Grrrl movement of the

1990s represented a further disruption to suburban tranquility because it not only leaned into the presence of women in rock music but also encouraged the intertwining of music and activism, gaining significant popularity first in the Pacific Northwest and eventually across the country (Siegfried 25). The rock, grunge, and punk scenes of the 1990s thus were all intertwined with the diversification of the authentic suburban voice, in very much the same way queer people were; Tongson's assertion that the suburbs acted as embodiments of the American dream and the ideal family life are thus supported further by the introduction of queer and underground music into the space (Tongson 2).

Speaking briefly on authenticity – by this I mean identities and individuals who directly oppose the suburban ideal through their sexuality or gender – this trend was not solely reserved to the alternative rock movement of the 1990s; more "palatable" mainstream artists such as Melissa Etheridge began to gain popularity in this decade. Although her music was not explicitly queer, its entry into the bedrooms of young queer suburban girls helped reify the importance of suburban spaces in understanding the condition of queer women in the 1990s, as will be discussed in two of the case studies in this project. The 1990s are thus not a decade in which queer expression grew and became more visible in non-urban spaces.

Vintage as Reclamation and the 2015 Turning Point

The early push for marriage equality began in the 1990s, with a focus on the right to get married as a key marker of the gay rights movement in the West (Love 53). This fight was one that carried through the 2000s, culminating with the Supreme Court's declaration of nationwide marriage equality in 2015, the turning point upon which this

study hinges. 2015 acts as the moment where the dominant fight in the gay rights movement was achieved, marking the moment in which many luxuries of the past became distinct contemporary possibilities. Vintage plays a crucial role in identifying what these moments are, and what role reclaiming them or engaging with them plays in contemporary queerness and this study specifically.

Ulrika Dahl points to the importance of vintage in the reclaiming and curating of queer identity, arguing that reaching into the past affords queer women the opportunity to resonate with time periods, like the 1950s, that have otherwise been heteronormatively coded. In one instance she describes a woman who feels that vintage aesthetics provide her with the ability to live out a domestic dream that she felt connected to and yet largely unrepresented in (Dahl 613). Vintage thus acts as an opportunity to reconstruct and re-create pasts that do not readily make themselves available to contemporary queer people. Understanding vintage as reclamation within the queer community allows for a greater understanding of art and artistry as such as well; aesthetics in music that capture these feelings make it possible to reconsider these time periods from otherwise underrepresented perspectives.

This is the point upon which this study rests; vintage and nostalgia act as reclamatory practices in post-marriage equality America, encouraging readings of media at the time to be viewed as such as well. The media which follows this time period – music videos, in this case – must be considered both as practices of activism and authenticity, but also as moments for vintage to serve a healing role for queer people. In a post-2015 world, where marriage and traditional family values have become far more

plausible and achievable for queer people, media such as the music videos in this study become sites for both conversations on queer pasts and consideration for queer futures.

V: Case Studies

Hayley Kiyoko: A Brief Overview

Few contemporary pop artists have enjoyed such an impassioned and dedicated fanbase as Hayley Kiyoko. Coined "lesbian Jesus" by her fanbase, Kiyoko is perhaps the most well-known figure working in queer pop today. Certainly, her past as a Disney star has contributed to this notoriety; however, the magnitude of her decision to be out should not be ignored. In the mid 2000s, Kiyoko was Disney's resident rebel, playing the bad girl or punk in various shows and movies. Despite being of Japanese descent, Kiyoko still managed to carve out her own space in a traditionally white and heteronormative Disney landscape. Kiyoko's decision to be open about her identity was thus a big one, and one that has yielded her great results. Since 2015, Kiyoko has released multiple albums and videos all with her unabashed queerness at the forefront.

Hayley Kiyoko, 1990s Suburbia, and the Friends to Lovers Trope

In 2015, Hayley Kiyoko released her first single, simply titled "Girls Like Girls." This song acted as Kiyoko's vehicle for coming out to the world while simultaneously encouraging young queer women to find a safe space in pop music where their desires and experiences could be reflected back to them in the purest and most authentic way. In speaking on her motives for writing the song, Kiyoko said that "[t]here's not a lot of representation for young girls who are best friends who might fall in love. A big point for me was to respect that and keep it real, so people can realize it's not just a joke" (Menta,

2016). Kiyoko's music video and song engage in a reclamation of 1990s suburbia as a backdrop to explore narratives of queer romance through teenage friendship and exploration. She encourages audiences to consider the aesthetics of the video in conjunction with the song's narrative and how these components interact with one another to perform queer female friendship and intimacy in a setting that otherwise upholds compulsory heteronormativity.

Yearning and longing remains the overarching motif of the video and the song; Kiyoko's lyrics address the hypernormalization of queer female intimacy as well as yearning after female friends in environments where this behaviour is not quite so simple to address – or even identify. The video reifies and reinforces these lyrics, contributing to the reading of this video as a story of queer longing with a happy ending. The constant two shots between the two main girls – moments where they share the screen together without any supporting characters – immediately suggests to the audience that this story is about them, but not in the conventional way most would assume. While the two girls do share these scenes, they rarely look happy or content, often glancing at one another while the other is not looking. These shots encourage the audience to read this story as one that has been developing long before the events in the video occur. These two girls clearly share some sort of connection that is uncomfortable, messy, and incomplete. This yearning and longing is reminiscent of the subduing of queer romance and attraction in the 1990s; while discourse surrounding queerness was becoming more prevalent, acting upon such feelings still required discretion and caution. As Heather Love argues, the turn towards marriage equality encouraged individuals to be more open while still existing in a

fairly restrictive and heteronormative society (Love 53). Kiyoko depicts these two conflicting tendencies through the interactions between the two girls and the main motifs of the song.

Kiyoko's lyrics engage immediately with the theme of longing and yearning. In the first verse, Kiyoko sings "Stealing kisses from your missus / Does it make you freak out? / Got you fussing, got you worried / Scared to let your guard down" ("Girls Like Girls"). These lyrics suggest a romance or encounter that is not obvious at first glance. She sings about the boyfriend of the love interest being scared, worried, and fussing, while she is "stealing kisses." These lyrics make the message clear: while some sort of romance is happening here, it certainly is not something that can be shouted from the rooftops or proudly displayed like a heterosexual relationship could be. Kiyoko is singing about a friendship turning into a romance and the difficulty that comes with that, immediately asking listeners to consider histories of discretion that the queer community has faced (Sedgewick 67-68; Faderman 131).

More broadly, this music video engages with queer friendship as a conduit through which intimacy and outness might be achieved in the still restrictive social space of the 1990s suburbs. Kiyoko creates a narrative with the aesthetics and story of the video that invites audiences to think back on time periods where discretion was necessary while simultaneously making it evident that intimacy and romance is building here. The attraction between the two women feels largely unrequited until almost the very end of the video; the main character is repeatedly seen glancing at her friend and feeling uncomfortable watching her friend with her boyfriend; while this is not clearly

telegraphed through words or explicit actions, audiences are quickly introduced to the possibility that more is going on between these two girls than one might expect. This unrequited trope seems to uphold the traditional narratives surrounding queer female interactions in which one woman ends up with a man in the end and the other is left alone to suffer for attempting to break the heteronormative couple up; these tropes have long since existed in music videos and often act as ways for artists to toe the line between explicit queerness and palatable heteronormativity for their diverse audiences (Dhaenens 534-535). Kiyoko, however, subverts this narrative at the end of the video; when the boyfriend attempts to attack the two girls for kissing, the main character fights back and the girls end up together in the end. Kiyoko subverts standard tropes in a liberatory manner; by allowing the women to take their power back and end up together by the end of the video, she is thus reclaiming both the narrative and the time period simultaneously.

Kiyoko engages in the use of vintage aesthetics throughout the video to reinforce the time period; the 1990s act as the backdrop upon which a story such as this one can best be told. Costuming plays a critical role in establishing the time period: baggy clothes, plaid shirts, and chokers dominate the video. While the costuming would fit as contemporary in 2015, it contributes even more strongly to the 1990s aesthetic. It works in tandem with setting: a bungalow-style home with wood panelling and a tiled kitchen, which recalls a time where design techniques were shifting and suburban homes were caught in the middle (Tongson 34). 1990s suburbia acts as a strange middle ground between tradition and contemporality, progress and stagnancy, in a way that encourages artists to play with the space strategically in media (Tongson 2-3). The video reifies these

aesthetics through the repeated use of landscape and setting shots to strongly convey the 1990s feel.

To understand the value of this song as a reclamation of the 1990s time period, it is crucial to also discuss the artistic choices and decisions behind the video. Kiyoko directed the video, although she did not star in it as she usually does in her videos. In explaining why, Kiyoko said, "I wasn't in the video because I was like 'It's not about me, it's about this story' and I kinda separated myself from it. I was so terrified to release it because I felt like I was outing myself" (Kiyoko, 2018). This decision is reflective of the video's themes of discretion, safety, and protecting oneself from the dangers of coming out when you are wildly unsure of the climate of the society you are coming out to. To engage with a time period in which her own fears were so common and so real, Kiyoko not only reclaims the period for her queer fans, but also for herself. She places her actresses in power fields, in bathrooms, in bedrooms as a way to give them the privacy and discretion she had similarly afforded herself here, balancing explicit queerness and intimacy with the discretion that was necessary in a tumultuous and unpredictable 1990s queer landscape.

Kiyoko engages with this reclamation on a deeper level, given her role as a former Disney star. She appeared in various Disney shows and movies through her teen years, as did her two main actresses, Stefanie Scott and Kelsey Chow. These three are identifiable as children's stars first, particularly by their audience, and thus evoke the acceptability politics for former childhood stars. The Disney child star was a pinnacle of 1990s media and had to conform to a rigid set of rules on respectability; Disney certainly did not – and

still does not – encourage much queer coding in its shows or movies and definitively situated itself as a space for the nuclear, heteronormative family to thrive (Fan 122-123). The three actresses participating in this video thus deepen the level of reclamation occurring here by virtue of their histories. Their audiences are presented with actresses, who once embodied 1990s and 2000s morals, now pushing the limits of respectability and acceptability in the very type of suburban setting in which audiences first encountered them. The 1990s is therefore challenged by this video and song in two ways: through aesthetic and narrative and through the identities of the individuals making the work.

Kiyoko's first foray into solo music making and directing here acts as a site for multiple forms of reclamation and liberation. Many queer women were familiar with her as a Disney star first, albeit one who was edgy and unconventional by Disney standards. Her punkish clothing and hair combined with her rebellious behaviour signposted her to fans as a subversive presence in an otherwise highly normative media form. In creating this song and video, Kiyoko broke free from these constraints and began to establish herself as a major voice in the queer music artist landscape of the twenty-first century. Kiyoko uses her lyrics as well as specific aesthetics in her music video to push the narrative that this song is about two friends in the 1990s shifting their relationship to romance in a space where such behaviour was not encouraged or appreciated. Her video speaks broadly to what discretion looked like in the 1990s but also uses the time period to reclaim and resist these notions. The girls end up together at the end and manage to overcome the abusive, toxic heteronormative expectations placed upon them through most of the video. The final shot of the main character is fitting: she glides smoothly

down her suburban street on her bicycle, a picture of Western normalcy and acceptability while carrying a secret, a love that she finally gets to express. She smirks to herself and the video ends, leaving audiences knowing that no matter the consequences of the video, this is one of freedom, joy, and liberation.

MUNA: A Brief Overview

Meeting in college in 2013, LA-based electropop band MUNA originally began as a ska band, before quickly pivoting to pop. Comprised of singer Katie Gavin and guitarists Josette Maskin and Naomi McPherson, MUNA is a band dedicated to creating pop music with a twist; they create songs that are undoubtedly pop but also undoubtedly unique as they play with instrumentals, electronics, and lyrics not often seen in the standard pop song. All three band members identify as queer, and together they seek to restructure both the pop industry and the queer music industry through their commitment to inclusive, equitable, and progressive song writing.

MUNA, the Return to the Suburbs, and Old Flames

In 2017, MUNA released their first studio album, titled *About U.* After touring with Harry Styles in the same year, MUNA saw a rapid rise to popularity within the queer community. MUNA has leaned into its members' queer identifications and creates music devoid of pronouns or gendered terms to accurately represent the lived experiences of all listeners, not just those who align with their sexualities (Pavone). One of the songs which garnered the most popularity was "Winterbreak," a five-minute opus to lost connections and old relationships. In her own words, lead singer Katie Gavin describes the song as being "about a high-school relationship - but then you go to college and, even though it's

been a year, there's still something there and it's totally misleading" (Savage, 2016). In this song, the band grapples with uncertainty, awkwardness, and the liminal space that is one's hometown after they have left and headed off to college. Set in late 1990s to early 2000s suburbia, this music video asks viewers to question what transitional moments look like for young queer people caught between their own identities and the world they have not so long ago left behind.

The song and video certainly do not gesture toward vintage as the main aesthetic; however, the role that pastness plays in this piece is clear with further investigation. The video has a gritty, indie feel to match the indie roots of the band, with darkened filters guiding the viewer's perception both on the emotions of the main actors as well as the overall tone of the video. This filter lends a retro quality to the video. Clothing and hairstyles contribute to the dating of the video; similar to Kiyoko's video, plaid, baggy clothes, and denim dominate the wardrobe choices, and Gavin's Chelsea haircut instantly clues viewers in to what the time period is. The car the band travels in for most of the video only reifies the period setting and, again, viewers are tasked with dating an otherwise fluid video. This is likely an intentional choice as the inability to identify a specific time period for the video strengthens its sense of liminality, placelessness and discomfort.

Regarding placelessness and liminality, the piece grapples with these intense feelings and calls upon viewers to bask in the discomfort one might feel when stuck between identities or moments in life. Nostalgia and awkwardness work in tandem to establish an inability to faithfully commit to one's current identity without unpacking and

having to exist in the past one. For many queer people, going home after leaving or moving out for the first time is a tumultuous event; establishing a sense of self outside of the space where an individual grows up is a journey that leads to much liberation for young queer people, and thus going back home – and subsequently grappling with one's current identity and the one they left behind – can feel unsettling or uncomfortable for many (Ferguson & Miville 976-977). Suburbia is once again situated as an oppressive structure in this piece as the artists engage with discomfort and awkwardness within this setting. In one scene, the mother of the main actor (Katie Gavin) looks out the window sadly as her daughter heads off to go out with friends. While the daughter is joyful and excited to see her friends, her mother's expression directly contradicts this and makes viewers question what has her so upset. This disconnect denotes a larger motif present in the video; when adult children come back home during school breaks, they begin to fulfill this liminal role, neither being wholly a child anymore nor an adult at the same time, leaving them distant from their family and struggling to find some semblance of normalcy in this new dynamic. For queer people, this is increased tenfold if parents are not aware of or accepting of their children. This is what MUNA is attempting to capture: the liminality that occurs when caught between two life moments, the way that nostalgia combines with change to leave people scrambling for normalcy.

This discomfort and awkwardness is not limited to individual identity considerations but extends to intimacy as well. The song is about coming home during the winter break, having to reconnect with past romances, and all of the resulting discomfort this situation entails. In particular, this song considers what the dynamic looks like in a

queer context and within queer friend groups. Queer people often have very tight social

spheres in which they feel comfortable to express themselves and live authentically,

finding overlap and mutual friendship simply by virtue of the limited peers queer people,

particularly in suburbia, might have[4]. The result of this is that exes often must stay in

contact with each other, even peripherally, due to shared friend groups and connections.

This can lead to discomfort and an inability to release feelings quite as easily as

heterosexual exes could. In the chorus of the song, Gavin sings, "Oh, baby, I think we

both know / This is the love that we won't get right / Still, if you said that you wanted / I

know I'll always have one more try" ("Winterbreak" 2017). The lyrics of the song lend to

the feelings of liminality and in-betweenness that are captured in the theme of the video;

when one is caught in between the past and the present, it becomes difficult to release the

things that came before in favour of moving forward and freeing oneself from such

situations.

On a broader scale, this is a commentary on nostalgia as a liberatory practice, as

MUNA does acknowledge the need to identify these feelings and represent them. The

piece takes place in a suburban middle ground where the subject of the song is not

expected to unpack all of these complex feelings but rather sit with them and endure them

to come out the other side. As a reflection of queerness, this piece encourages sitting with

pastness as a method to finally moving on from it; if the subject of the video is able to

endure this discomfort and awkwardness, perhaps this work can be done on a grander

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[4] Families of choice, or chosen families, are the terms used to refer to this trend of behaviour within the queer community. Queer people often search for community and comfort in other queer people when faced with a lack of acceptance from their heterosexual peers or family members (Dewaele et al. 313).

scale as well. Perhaps the painful and upsetting pasts that many queer people find difficulty facing can actually become spaces for liberation and reclamation. This is the important work that MUNA does here and why it is so crucial to interrogate the video as set in the past. Without the 2000s setting, this video is simply a commentary on returning home from college for the first time; by setting it in the past, however, MUNA encourages readings of queerness as a historical identity with behaviours and experiences that are universally felt regardless of time period. Queer audiences can thus identify with the minutia of historical queerness and engage in the unpacking of complex and upsetting pasts.

MUNA does not simply leave audiences with these feelings without presenting some joy; the video is full of casual intimacy and found family tropes, encouraging readings of platonic queerness as a space for comfort in an uncomfortable time. The video repeatedly shows the band hugging, kissing, and being close to one another as the story progresses; in these moments, the main character is genuinely happy and revelling in the support of her friends. These scenes are reflective of a broader collective joy that much of the queer community shares as they portray casual intimacy as a normalized aspect of platonic relationships. Queer friendships are often not beholden to the same limitations as heterosexual friendships, and discomfort does not have to underly each interaction in the same way (Proehl 20). MUNA thus engages with a representation of queerness that is not rife with struggle and desolation but rather one that moves and behaves like any other identity would. The character is not emoting solely due to her relationship and the feelings she is getting from it; instead, she is expressing queerness as a platonic identity

as well and experiencing joy through this. Again, MUNA normalizes queerness as fluid and worthy of investigation as both a contemporary and historical identity, asking audiences to consider how casual intimacy in a liminal and upsetting space can contribute to the reclamation of such moments in the broader queer narrative.

In closing, MUNA engages in critical work as they encourage audiences to consider the role of queerness in awkward spaces while leaning into the discomfort. As the video progresses, audiences must watch and listen to the protagonist of the video as they experience a relationship that can never truly be let go of so long as they keep returning to this same space. Suburbia and pastness work in tandem to establish a setting where the main character cannot grow past or return to where they once were, establishing a liminal space through which this work can be done. The audience is tasked with understanding how leaning into this discomfort might be a liberatory practice. While this occurs on a micro scale in the video, it is a commentary on how such work can contribute to larger scale healing for queer people as a whole. By encouraging the acceptance of these feelings, MUNA thus provides their audience with the platform to engage with the liberatory practice of doing this work and accepting discomfort, rather than running from it.

King Princess: A Brief Overview

In February of 2018, Mikaela Straus, known by her stage name King Princess, released her debut single, titled "1950." This song acted as both a love story to the LGBTQ community and a reckoning with queerness in the past. King Princess herself identifies as both genderqueer and gay and makes specific effort to write about her

experiences authentically and with representation in mind. Signing with Mark Ronson's Zelig Records in 2017, King Princess has had a meteoric rise to fame within the queer community. Receiving a glowing seal of approval from pop star Harry Styles, who has tweeted some of the lyrics from the aforementioned single, King Princess has since become one of the pillars of the queer pop genre.

King Princess, the 1950s, and Shame and Yearning in Queer History

From the title alone, this song situates itself within the 1950s, and King Princess opens the doors to exploring and representing a time period in which she does not live. Within the first few lines of the song King Princess sings, "I love it when we play 1950s/ it's so cold that your stare's about to kill me/ I'm surprised when you kiss me," asking audiences to immediately consider what it means to "play 1950s?" How might one "play" a time period? Through visuals and filters, lyrics, and video themes, King Princess does just this. In an interview with Genius Lyrics, King Princess described her use of the aforementioned lyrics as "an analogy. It's a metaphor in the sense that I think I was using the idea of the way that queer people had to hide their love in history, throughout our history. Being a parallel to unrequited love […] and how that looks very similar to the way people once couldn't be gay in public" (Genius.com). Her use of the 1950s as vintage here is twofold: she is both paying homage to the troubles and difficulties queer people in history faced while simultaneously taking those cultural threads and tracing them into the current day.

While the lyrics do make explicit reference to the time period in which this song is situated, the visuals of the music video are the components that lend most heavily to the

nostalgic aesthetic of this song. Much of the video is filmed in a sepia tone on gritty, often handheld or low-quality cameras. While this might be attributed to a lower production budget, the filters and techniques make these choices feel marked and intentional. King Princess faces the camera head-on in multiple scenes as though she is the one holding the camera, giving it an unfinished or unpolished quality that lends to the dating of the video. While it is obvious that these scenes take place in the twenty-first century, the scenes where she is on stage with her band do not. The filter is much more pronounced in these moments, and the camera remains static, lending to the feeling of this performance possibly taking place as part of a 1950s variety show.

The presentation of King Princess herself is crucial to the coding of this music video as both nostalgic and queer. She employs drag aesthetics and androgyny throughout the video in order to queer the presentation and invite discourse surrounding queer bodies and acceptable presentability in the past. She wears a button-up shirt and has a drawn on moustache during her scenes on stage. Her behaviour is reminiscent of 1950s male lounge and nightclub singers; when she smokes a cigarette and sings into a stationary mic during performance scenes, it is difficult to gender her but quite easy to position her in time. She is employing the 1950s butchness as an aesthetic here, borrowing from the time to present herself and yet simultaneously is subverting tropes of the time period to queer the scene and resituate herself in the past. King Princess accomplishes this queering through the use of drag in conjunction with the 1950s theme; King Princess combines these moments with her exaggerated genderqueerness here to emphasize her role as a queer person and the othering directed at bodies that look this way.

Othering and outness is the driving factor behind the efforts to accomplish nostalgia in this song and video. The video hinges upon the ability for the audience to identify what King Princess is doing here as queer and nostalgic, so this becomes her ultimate goal in creating the piece. She accomplishes this through the distinctions between her 1950s and contemporary scenes and the differences in representations between the two. The video is split into two major themes that it switches between throughout, inviting audiences to consider the song simultaneously contemporary and nostalgic at the same time. In all of the scenes set in the 1950s, King Princess does not engage in any expressions of explicit queerness or romanticism. She smokes, sings and dances alone during these moments and does not share the screen with her love interest until the final moments of the video, where the two can be seen embracing and dancing with one another in the same setting where she was previously dancing alone. Her loneliness is a tactic to make audiences connect with the feelings of loneliness and discretion that many queer people faced in the 1950s. In connection to the earlier quote, this is a commentary on how queer people had to hide in earlier decades in order to be safe (Sedgewick 67-68). In this way, the scene where she dances with her love interest can be seen as a reclamation of sorts; she takes up the same space and is in the same location as earlier, however this time she is not alone. She is openly expressing queer love in a 1950s setting, making the video about more than just shame in the 1950s and openness in the modern age.

To underscore these themes, King Princess dedicates most of the video to expressing explicit queerness with her on-screen love interest in contemporary clothing,

locations, and settings. The audience is shown scenes of romance and openness throughout the video. The contrasting temporal settings invite audiences to consider the differences between these two ages and where discretion dominated queer expression. Her demeanor and attire in the 1950s scenes reinforce masculinity and tradition as a method of situating queerness in history as othered in contrast to the normalcy and softness of the contemporary representations.

King Princess is not only queer in her sexuality, but queer in her gender identity as well. She refers to herself using traditionally feminine terms throughout the song – such as "pretty" or "lady" – as an effort to trouble these terms and the traditional readings of queer bodies and love. In speaking on this, King Princess said, "I'm not a lady. It was supposed to be a joke, that line, because I fall somewhere in between everything, and I love that. To say, 'I'm just a lady' once was an insult. It's reclaiming it" (Genius.com). Once again, she makes reference to histories of shame and discomfort with femininity, particularly in the realm of queer female sexuality, arguing that these terms are not traditionally attributed to someone who looks like her. These lyrics, combined with her drag aesthetic in the 1950s scenes, can be seen as reclaiming space in queer history; she can engage in hypermasculinity while simultaneously referring to herself as "pretty" because she is writing in a more open, twenty-first-century space. These lyrics would not, however, have the same effect if this were not a song about a traditionally restrictive and uncomfortable time period for queer and gender non-conforming people. She strategically utilizes the 1950s as a backdrop for reclamation in this song and video, inviting audiences

into the past but queering it deeply through her presentation of both her gender and sexuality.

Ultimately, King Princess creates an atmosphere of yearning, longing, and histories of shame through the use of her lyrics and the nostalgic themes of this song. She employs the 1950s as a setting that is freeing rather than stifling in order to invite listeners to view this time period as a space to reclaim rather than a space to ignore for fear of having to sit with pain and discomfort. Her utilization of drag and vintage in conjunction with one another both date this video and provide it with a distinct queerness that could not possibly be ignored by audiences. These two components work in tandem to create a space to consider what a 1950s space might look like when queerness and openness underscore its construction.

Janelle Monae: A Brief Overview

In 2006, Sean "Diddy" Combs signed his newest act to Bad Boy Records, a young woman by the name of Janelle Monae. Since then, Monae has gone on to release four studio albums, drawing on sci-fi and Afrofuturist aesthetics to construct a cyborg narrative that fans can trace throughout her works. 2018 saw Monae release *Dirty Computer*, her latest album and one of her most candid. In this album, Monae not only plays with her cyborg identity but also expresses unabashed queerness in songs like "Pynk" and "Make Me Feel." Monae is openly queer and not coy about it, explicitly identifying herself as pansexual and weaving these themes throughout her work. She identifies with fluidity as a state of being, so it is no surprise her work often follows suit.

Janelle Monae, Pansexuality, and 80s Queer Culture

No stranger to pushing boundaries, speaking out, and sharing her personal experiences, Janelle Monae remains one of the most creative and expressive R&B Pop artists of the twenty-first century. Drawing inspiration from artists like Prince, Michael Jackson, David Bowie, and Erykah Badu, Monae encourages readings of her music as countercultural or representative of otherwise marginalized identities. In 2018, Monae released "Make Me Feel" as one of two lead singles for *Dirty Computer.* In this track she engages with a representation of 1980s queer dance and club culture while critically assessing these locations as spaces for reclamation and exploration of fluid sexual identities. In speaking on the release of the song and the underlying message, Monae said, "I'm about agency. I'm about being in control of your narrative and your body" (Borge, 2018). This song is an effort to do exactly that: control the narrative and reconfigure readings of the 1980s as a space for queer liberation and fluid expression.

Right as the video begins, the 1980s aesthetics are made clear. Monae and co-star Tessa Thompson, who also appears in her "Pynk" video, enter a club lit by colourful neon lights, surrounded by people in shoulder pads, sequined jackets, and sporting hairstyles reminiscent of the time period. Monae strategically uses clothing and ambience here to gesture towards vintage as the aesthetic of the video, immediately inviting viewers to consider what carries the weight of pastness in this opening scene. As the AIDS epidemic increased in the 1980s, any queer people were forced out of more mainstream bars and thus needed to make spaces for themselves; out of this ostracization came the rapid popularity of bars and clubs for openly queer people who would otherwise be turned away (Henkes 286-287). Monae not only invites readings of this setting as distinctly

vintage, she also encourages it to be read as a space that is distinctly queer. The video feature 1980s drag and camp aesthetics, strongly positioning the video as set in a queer space, not just a vintage one.

Sound plays a role in situating this video in pastness and retro as well. The album faithfully recreates many of the synthpop aesthetics of the 1980s as drum machines and synthesizers combine with Monae's modern Jazzpop voice to create an album that is neither modern nor retro and, yet, is both at the same time. In creating the album, Monae partnered with Prince who collaborated on the album as a mentor of Monae's, recommending materials and equipment that would best allow Monae to recreate the sounds of the 1980s (Spanos 2018). Prince's influence is clear in the song; synthesizers combine with a Prince-esque guitar riff that give listeners pause and encourage a reconsideration of where in time this album is meant to rest. Monae thus achieves a sort of timelessness with her content, recreating the sounds of the past while simultaneously combining them with her experiences as a modern musician.

The value of the video and its role in this study rests largely upon the usage of queerness as a distinct aesthetic. As mentioned earlier, Monae utilizes specific aesthetics to introduce audiences to this imagined world as one that is not only vintage but also queer. Queer bar culture in postwar America and through to the 1990s has been a space for individuals to explore public queer expression and represent themselves authentically without the influence or oppression of wider society (Dahl 607-608, Brown-Saracino 1025). Monae draws upon these histories in the video; she walks through the bar with Thompson as the camera takes on a POV role, tracking where Monae is looking before

swinging back around to catch her looking directly at her co-star. She is unabashedly staring and taking in the sights because this is a safe space to do so; Monae begins to paint a picture of safety in a tumultuous 1980s queer landscape. She comes upon a version of herself dressed in bright clothing and draped across a lounge chair, looking upon this iteration with wonder and intrigue. She thus is engaging with herself in a twofold manner: in one way, she is the first-time visitor, shocked by what is occurring and taking in the location with shock and surprise. In another way, she is also the queer person who is completely at home with this space and comfortable with what she is seeing. She tracks her journey simultaneously here, expressing both liberation and immersion from a dual perspective that encourages the viewer to consider what fluid sexual identity and expression might look like in a space not beholden to the acceptability politics of the outside world.

In keeping with the theme of fluidity, the main focus of this song for Monae is sexual fluidity, bisexuality, and pansexuality. The song has been heralded as a "bi anthem" by many and has served as a coming out of sorts for Monae, who had previously been unwilling to share her sexuality with the media. In creating this song, Monae thus embarks on a journey to represent sexual exploration in the 1980s as an effort to reclaim the time period and create utopian readings of sexuality in the past. Perhaps the biggest point of diversion or non-normativity in this video is through the lack of an explicit love interest; Monae shares the screen – and intimacy – with both a male and female partner, not specifying who takes precedence. Monae's sexuality is the subject here and the video acts as a representation of the love she has the potential to experience. Rather than

reifying tropes of bi and pansexual people needing to "choose a side," Monae engages

with a reading of fluid sexuality as a continuous experience not dictated by an

individual's partners but rather by their own experiences. The symbolism in the video is

clear: Monae is present on screen moving back and forth between her two partners in the

same scene, providing them with equal time and intimacy throughout. Her goal is thus not

to choose or settle here but rather to faithfully represent what fluid sexuality looks like in

a setting not constrained or beholden to moral acceptability of heteronormative society.

Monae engages with subversion as a symbol of sexual freedom and queer

attraction or intimacy. The video repeatedly subverts the male gaze and positions Monae

– and subsequently the viewer – as the female desirer rather than the object of desire.

During the chorus dance scenes, Monae is seen crawling around on the floor, touching her

backup dancers, and rubbing their legs as she sings to her audience. She subtly nods off a

person with their hand on her female love interest's back, staking her claim and leaving

no questions as to whether or not this partnership is a romantic or intimate one. Monae

uses her queerness as a way to explore what the gaze might look like in a non-

heteronormative world; she has the power in this video and she is able to thus interact

with her environment differently than she would without explicit queerness informing the

symbolic and stylistic choices.

The song itself engages in these acts of symbolic expressions of sexual fluidity in

environments that condition individuals towards rigidity or acceptability. In the opening

lyrics of the song, Monae sings, "Baby don't make me spell it out for ya/ All of the

feelings that I've got for ya." ("Make Me Feel" 2018). Monae sings on needing to be

explicit with feelings in a queer setting, particularly for bi and pansexual people, and engages with this very idea throughout the video. She is expressing the difficulty in making one's feelings known when said feelings are directly opposed to what heteronormative society expects. She thus must "spell it out" for her partner(s) in order to get them to understand her positionality and desire. Monae is not experiencing internal difficulty here; rather, she is expressing the difficulties that come along with rigidity in sexual identity. She therefore is twisting and rewriting the narrative, putting the onus on society rather than the queer community. The problem here is not her making things unclear through her fluid sexual identity; it is said identity being historically erased or underrepresented in wider society. Monae subtly unpacks these heavy topics through her unwillingness to clearly state her own identity, reflecting both the narrative of the video and her own long-standing hesitancy to put a specific identifier upon herself to make the media comfortable.

Ultimately, this video acts as an exploration of what sexual fluidity and identity politics might look like in a utopian world free of moral acceptability politics that have historically pushed such identities to the fringes of society. In a 1980s context, Monae is able to reconstruct notions of what queer joy and community looks like without societal imposition; she takes the 1980s queer narrative which is often dominated by sadness, strife, and suffering and reconstructs it. She explores her identity freely, allowing herself to express desire for both men and women equally in a space that lets her do so. The queer club she is in acts as a site for identity reclamation to occur, and the 1980s aesthetic acts as a site for time period and narrative reclamation to occur. Monae is thus acting

upon a twofold resistance here; she is allowing herself an authentic representation of her own identity and also taking the power back for the queer community regarding how the 1980s are portrayed with precedence given to queer pain. Monae does not diminish the time period or queer aesthetics throughout this video; instead, she moves fluidly through genre, time period, and identity, encouraging audiences to imagine what past narratives would look like without the imposition of heteronormative perspectives.

VI: Conclusions

The queer artists in these four studies all use aesthetics of queerness and nostalgia to reclaim and reconfigure histories of shame and pain. They all participate in the post-marriage equality media landscape, which has afforded many opportunities for freer investigations of queer identities and histories. The post-2015 landscape has effectively acted as the queer 1950s, offering greater access to marriage, parenting, spousal rights, and visibility. This renaissance has encouraged reinvestigations of queer pastness as individuals begin to consider more diverse narratives in a time that allows for such considerations.

As the author of this study, my positionality offers unique perspective on the tangible waves and ripples this shift and these kinds of media have caused. My own coming out lined up neatly with the release of the first text in this study; I came out in May of 2015 and only a short month later, Kiyoko released "Girls Like Girls," her own coming out story. I am uniquely positioned to discuss the effects of this pop music shift as someone who experienced not only the media of the post-2015 landscape, but also experienced them as some of the first queer media I consumed as a newly queer-identified

person. This content encouraged readings of queerness not only as normal and diverse, but as historical and rich as well. Watching women in the 1990s experience the same fear and uncertainty and love I was experiencing at the time created a stronger understanding of queerness as a joyful, hopeful identity and not as one rife with innate trauma and pain.

In the same way that my positionality informed this project, future research regarding this topic should analyze the ways that these media artifacts and this turn to nostalgia in queer music making have impacted queer audiences. As mentioned, queer women affiliated audiences are critical in understanding the queer music videos and the work they are doing with vintage and nostalgia. Young women often turn to music as a space to find guidance and representation for their lived experiences (Harman 555), searching for narratives that they feel best represent them and looking elsewhere when dominant or popular media fails them (Ng 105).

Very little research has been done on the ways that queer women engage with media. Cordelia Freeman argues that "[i]f the cultures of stars and celebrities are about the visibility of certain individuals, then it is important to try and understand some of the people who are doing the looking" (Freeman, 1022). Queer female fans thus offer a wealth of insight into why queer artists are becoming far more open and explicit in their desires and narratives. Queer women making queer music are introducing the unabashed sexualization of queer women, not for the heterosexual male gaze but rather for their queer audiences that are loyal and dedicated to their work (1019-1020). Because female fandom has long since been defined by the desire and hypersexualization of fan feelings towards male idols, lesbians and other queer women have often been pushed to the

fringes of female fan studies or are otherwise desexualized in their media consumption (Brickman 444-445).

Ultimately, queer artists and queer women in the post-2015 landscape have embarked on a journey to address queerness as a diverse, yet distinct, identity through the reclamation and re-examination of different, previously traumatic, time periods. This project sought to analyze these texts as both explorations of pastness as well as authentic representations of the lives of queer women in the music industry today. This study considered the ways in which these artifacts engaged with nostalgia as an aesthetic and how it informed the stories the artists were attempting to tell. Queer music makers have been present in the industry as long as it has existed; in the post-2015 landscape, queer women are making strides to represent their stories authentically, unabashedly, and with the community in mind.

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