**Beyond the Classic:**

**Lady Gaga and Theology in the Wild Public Sphere**

**Abstract**

There is a rich vein of theology running through much popular culture as exemplified by the artistic output of Lady Gaga, a discussion of which lies at the heart of this article. Such theological engagement with popular culture, it is argued, is an important task for public theology because this is a locus in which theology is already present in the public sphere. This suggests an approach to public theology that moves beyond David Tracy’s notion of the ‘classic’ in the context of hypermodernity. The case for this new agenda is presented in a twofold structure. Firstly, the theopolitical significance of Lady Gaga’s pop art is established. Secondly, a way of conceiving the ‘publicness’ of theological engagement with popular culture is articulated in dialogue with Habermas’s conception of the wild public sphere.

**Keywords**

Lady Gaga; popular music; public theology; public sphere; Habermas

Lady Gaga is a public theologian and professional public theologians cannot afford to ignore such popular public theopolitical expressions if their work is to connect with the public sphere in all its wild, polyphonic complexity. Theological engagement with popular culture is crucial not only for theology, but for civil society itself which needs theologians acting as critical citizens to challenge a more passive consumption of popular culture. But how should this engagement be conceptualized? In his seminal contribution to an understanding of the nature of public theology, David Tracy proposed the notion of the ‘classic’ as a way of thinking about the sorts of texts and traditions that are worthy of gaining a hearing in the public conversation. In *The Analogical Imagination[[1]](#footnote-1)* he articulates the nature of the Christian classic and offers a methodology for bringing this classic tradition before an audience beyond the ecclesial, contributing to the public conversation in the context of pluralism. As a way of conceptualizing the nature of public theology, Tracy’s contribution has considerable merit. Bringing classic traditions into dialogue in the public sphere is a crucial task of public theology. I argue, however, that this approach needs complementing by what may appear a more superficial, even flirtatious engagement in a public sphere that Habermas describes as a ‘wild complex.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This conviction about an additional agenda for public theology derives from an engagement with the theology of Lady Gaga whose performance art would be unlikely to warrant the status of classic, even given Tracy’s broad definition.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the first part of the article I argue that such engagement is an important task for public theology, illustrating the theopolitical significance of Lady Gaga with an analysis of one of her songs in the wider context of her artistic output and political engagement. The second part of the article provides a theoretical grounding of this approach to public theology in a later-Habermasian conception of the public sphere.

# The Theopolitical Significance of Lady Gaga

There is a view, classically stated by Theodor Adorno, that popular music is trivial and superficial at best, profoundly undermining of political culture at worst. Speaking about the relationship of music to leisure, Adorno claims that ‘[l]isteners are distracted from the demands of reality by entertainment which does not demand attention’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The tunes actually generate inattention in the listener through the medium of mass culture, creating a populace that shows no desire to challenge the *status quo*, offering no resistance to the dominant social forces. Popular music effectively replaces religion as the new opium of the people. Central to this effect of popular music is the notion of ‘standardization’, and this in two senses: firstly relating to the processes of production of popular music, but secondly to the music itself. Yet in order for the element of control involved in popular music to remain unchallenged, ‘the illusion and, to a certain extent, even the reality of individual achievement must be maintained.’[[5]](#footnote-5) In this process of ‘pseudo-individualization’[[6]](#footnote-6) music loses its distinctiveness and becomes merely a form of ‘social cement’,[[7]](#footnote-7) something relegated to the background,[[8]](#footnote-8) a scarcely noticed soundtrack for modern life.

Although Adorno’s critique of popular culture was developed initially in the 1930s and in many ways is of its time, it is still a theoretical perspective that cannot be ignored. Studies of popular music still regularly discuss Adorno’s critique,[[9]](#footnote-9) and a recent study of religion and popular music criticizes aspects of Adorno’s assessment whilst affirming its abiding significance.[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, it is certainly possible for popular music to function in the way Adorno describes, as a recent Guardian review of *Communion* by Years & Years notes: ‘Communion resembles the Sound of 2015 in the sense that it feels weirdly like a kind of omnipresent, nondescript background noise, the music you always seem to be listening to without actively choosing to.’[[11]](#footnote-11) The superficiality of some popular music no doubt underlies one of the noticeable features of the literature exploring the relationship between theology and popular music, namely that theologians in this field feel they have to justify such engagement in a way that those studying Bach or Messiaen do not. David Brown begins his discussion of popular music in an exemplary apologetic tone:

No doubt for many readers to go further down the road of ‘secular’ experience from classical music to contemporary popular music is already a stage too far. Their first thought may be to skip this chapter… It is often claimed that pop music must of necessity lie at the opposite extreme from true religious experience since the superficiality of music and lyrics alike deprives it of all depth.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Echoing Brown’s concern about the superficiality of popular music, the authors of another recent study face the nagging doubt that ‘perhaps popular music really is just for fun. Perhaps people consume popular music in the same way that they buy socks.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

Is this ambivalence warranted? It is my contention that, on the contrary, the case for studying classical music theologically is much harder to make than the case for studying popular music, particularly if one is interested in the public nature of theology in the contemporary context of hypermodernity. Public theological engagement with classical music is important as an example of ‘classics’ being brought into dialogue; with popular culture the argument is different. Particularly in the case of mass popular culture a key rationale for theological engagement boils down to the relationship with public opinion: popular music both reflects and shapes the beliefs and attitudes of civil society. This makes it an important source for public theology to engage with, facilitating the task of understanding at least one part of its public. My argument goes further, however, demonstrating that popular music contains significant public theological statements that should be heeded by public theologians. Before making that case in relation to Lady Gaga, some illustrative examples demonstrate the general point.

Hip Hop culture and Rap music are significant repositories of religious imagery and influence. The hard hitting portrayal of life in Black America is itself described by Carey Walsh as ‘prophetic realism’ in which rappers ‘offer what the biblical prophets had - namely, social critique and moral outrage by asserting God’s presence in the mix of concrete daily life’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Tupac Shakur has been described as an ‘urban theologian’[[15]](#footnote-15) on account of his articulation of a gospel for the ghetto, Daniel White Hodge arguing that such Hip Hop theology should be heeded by missiologists.[[16]](#footnote-16) Key to this theology is a stark recognition of the abiding tension between sacred and profane that is not easily resolvable to a traditional theological dualism of good and evil. It is precisely in this murky in-between space that God is encountered.[[17]](#footnote-17) Elements of this radical incarnational theology epitomized by Tupac remain in those who have transcended their roots in Hip Hop and become global popular music icons. There are echoes of this theological vision in Jay Z’s ‘Pray’,[[18]](#footnote-18) where verses from the Psalms read by Beyoncé are interspersed with Jay Z’s description of choices he faced growing up surrounded by drugs and violence in a Brooklyn housing project. His collaboration with Kanye West, ‘No Church in the Wild’,[[19]](#footnote-19) can be read less as anti-theology and more as a rejection of organized religion and, as such, an important voice for a public theology that must ultimately resonate in the ghettos as much as the political realm. West himself has affirmative theological themes running through his albums from the liberation Christology of ‘Jesus Walks’[[20]](#footnote-20) to the realized divinizing soteriology of ‘I am a God’.[[21]](#footnote-21) His continuing success apparently undermines his earlier speculation that singing about faith would be bad for sales:

They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus

That means guns, sex, lies, videotapes

But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, huh?[[22]](#footnote-22)

The error of that judgement shows that at least in this branch of popular culture there is scope for public theology.

A more recent example is Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* in which it is noteworthy how her political turn, championing Black Lives Matter and intersectional feminism, is supported by an increased theological dimension to her work.[[23]](#footnote-23) What stands out here is how the theological and political turns run in parallel. There was a political dimension to her work prior to *Lemonade*, but this was largely at the level of an advocacy of girl power in songs such as ‘Run the World (Girls)’[[24]](#footnote-24) and not sustained. There were also religious references in earlier material, but attempts to scratch the surface of songs like ‘Ave Maria’[[25]](#footnote-25) seem not to reveal hidden theological depths. *Lemonade*, on the other hand, is charged with a wealth of religious themes leading to her theology being praised by such diverse figures as a member of the Evangelical Alliance for its psalm-like ‘raw, brutal honesty’[[26]](#footnote-26) and a Faery initiate for celebrating the Goddess.[[27]](#footnote-27) But it is the Womanist theology of *Lemonade* that has received most attention,[[28]](#footnote-28) and here we note the intersection of religion and politics that seems to be central to this project:[[29]](#footnote-29) being political necessitates being theological. That *Lemonade* has been criticized by bell hooks[[30]](#footnote-30) for not providing an adequate challenge to the structures of patriarchy or resisting the commodification of the black female body only serves to strengthen the argument for critical (theological) engagement with such popular cultural texts.

Having made the case for the public theological significance of popular music and culture generally, what of the particular example of Lady Gaga? The bottom line here is the sheer extent of her popularity: she has (as at 07/07/16) over sixty-one million Twitter followers, over sixty-one million Facebook likes, has won numerous awards and sold millions of records, being the first recording artist ever to have four number one hits from a debut album.[[31]](#footnote-31) A popular cultural phenomenon - the infamous meat dress achieving notoriety even amongst those hard pressed to name any of her songs - her public significance arises in part from the controversy she generates. This can be seen as simply attention seeking, an elaborate promotion for her music; indeed, key to her success is the ability to surf the cultural waves of hypermodernity in which the speed of cultural exchange is unprecedented. As one commentator observes, ‘her elaborate performances and sartorial experimentation are deployed to create visual impressions that are practically tailor-made for the age of viral marketing’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Although some see this as yet more hype and publicity seeking, she herself sees the Lady Gaga persona and all that it entails as a complete artistic creation. Her collaboration on *Artpop* with pop artist Jeff Koons and performance artist Marina Abramović indicate that she sees herself as an artist contributing to a wider cultural conversation, not simply churning out reified products of popular culture for mass consumption. That she has been successful in contributing to public discourse is evidenced in part by the critical reception of her output. Two edited volumes of academic essays have responded to her work, one ‘through the interdisciplinary framework of performance identity’,[[33]](#footnote-33) the other in the field of popular music studies.[[34]](#footnote-34) An online journal has generated a wealth of critical engagements with her music, [[35]](#footnote-35) and her influence on debates about gender and queer identities inspired a monograph on ‘Gaga feminism’.[[36]](#footnote-36) The first two reasons for the choice, then, are popularity and public voice. A final reason for my interest, as noted at the outset, is that she is overtly theological, particularly in her second album *Born This Way*. Public theology should not concern itself solely with popular culture that is overtly theological, but explicit theology offers an access point for theologians. A theological engagement with Lady Gaga, then, is a theological engagement with someone of considerable influence, appeal and reach, someone who has a distinctive theological voice in the polyphonic public sphere.[[37]](#footnote-37)

# A Theological Reading of Lady Gaga

If this provides an initial rationale for engaging popular culture as public theology, the methodological question remains of how to read these texts of popular music critically and theologically. This question is addressed here primarily through a worked example of a Lady Gaga song followed by an analysis of the nature of this engagement as an exercise in public theology as critical citizenship. There is, however, a more basic question of how to ‘read’ popular music theologically in the first place.

Gordon Lynch articulates three approaches to studying popular culture theologically, with the focus being on the author, the text, or the audience.[[38]](#footnote-38) Numerous theological studies of particular artists and groups have focused on the author understood primarily through their lyrics, with Michael Gilmour illustrating this approach.[[39]](#footnote-39) Other studies have sought to engage more fully with the music *per se*, as exemplified by the discussion of popular music in David Brown’s trilogy exploring ‘religious experience through culture and the arts.’[[40]](#footnote-40) A striking feature of Brown’s work is the seriousness with which he treats precisely those examples of popular music that can seem furthest from conventional understandings of Christianity, such as Heavy Metal and Rap. Brown is engaging the wild public sphere, seeking to discern there the sense of God’s presence in various forms of embodied experience. Whilst this is an important theological task, however, what he is not doing is engaging in a critical theological dialogue with the varied texts of popular culture he treats. He is more concerned with what is happening in the music and how it functions almost sacramentally as a locus of divine encounter.

Robert Beckford is also concerned with music *qua* music and not just with lyrics. Describing his methodology as ‘acoustemology’, he seeks to discern the meaning of the music beyond the words. ‘Acoustemology’, he writes,

is the study of sound, an exploration of sonic sensibilities – how sound enables us to make sense of reality. … my primary concern in this analysis is with the ‘semiotics of sound’ – that is, how we interpret sound based on its structure and codes.[[41]](#footnote-41)

A further strength of Beckford’s approach is the use of black theology ‘as the norm through which culture is explored’.[[42]](#footnote-42) In Beckford’s approach, then, the texts of popular musical culture in the public sphere are richly conceived and critically interpreted for their theopolitical significance as integrated musical works rather than poems that happen to be set to music.

Marsh and Roberts approach popular music from the audience perspective, investigating how people receive texts of popular music, how they function in their lives and in contemporary society. [[43]](#footnote-43) This complements a text-based approach, offering critical theological readings of these texts, recognising the importance of reception to the interpretation of any text. Interpretation cannot afford to ignore authors, texts or audience if it is to attend to the place of theology in contemporary popular culture; only such a combined methodology is adequate to the task. This integrated approach to a theological analysis of Lady Gaga as public theologian leads to a conception that goes some way to addressing problems associated with the earlier, overly rational Habermasian conception of the public sphere to be discussed in the final section.

Numerous theological references in Lady Gaga’s music support the claim that she be considered a public theologian worthy of critical discussion. That most of these occur in her second album, *Born This Way* which sets out her vision of inclusivity and respect for difference, suggests that she sees a need to give a theological foundation to what emerges as her central political agenda. This is clearly expressed in the title track that sees sexual and other forms of diversity as God-given:

My mama told me when I was young

We are all born superstars…

“There's nothing wrong with loving who you are”

She said, “Cause he made you perfect, babe”...

I'm beautiful in my way

’Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This general affirmation is related specifically to sexual identity (‘a different lover is not a sin… no matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian, transgendered’), disability (‘whether life’s disabilities left you outcast, bullied or teased’), race (‘you’re black, white, beige...’). Hence a theological underpinning is given to valuing difference and the album critiques theological interpretations that reject this vision. On ‘Americano’ the statement ‘I don’t speak your, I won’t speak your Jesus Christo’ is a rejection of forms of Christianity that deny same sex marriage, which parallels an opposition to visions of American identity hostile to immigration: ‘I don’t speak your Americano’.[[45]](#footnote-45) The song reflects difficulties faced by immigrant and same-sex couples seeking marriage in America.[[46]](#footnote-46) The contribution of immigrant cultures is reflected musically by the incorporation of Spanish guitar, clapping and other elements of the Mexican mariachi genre into the musical style of the song which, coupled with some Spanish lyrics, celebrates Hispanic culture. In a *Vogue* interview Gaga describes the song as a ‘big mariachi techno-house record, where I am singing about immigration law and gay marriage and all sorts of things that have to do with disenfranchised communities in America’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Religion and culture both contribute to this disenfranchisement; a particular conservative understanding of Christianity is what is opposed in the inability and unwillingness to speak ‘your Jesus Christo’. As musically the dominant language of pop is shaped to be more inclusive by the inclusion of distinct mariachi elements, so the dominant cultural and theological traditions (Americano and Jesus Christo) are critiqued for their oppressive dominance.

Against the background of this critique Gaga’s positive theological vision is developed in songs about two figures that carry marginal associations in Christian tradition. ‘Bloody Mary’ is hard to interpret, but her typically strange confession of belief ‘that Mary Magdalene was both fully divine and fully human’[[48]](#footnote-48) suggests a transgression of the dominant theological tradition of Christianity which is continued in ‘Judas’, the most theological track on the album. As the video commences, Gaga rides with a motorcycle gang consisting of the twelve disciples; Jesus and Judas are the prominent figures alongside Gaga herself who apparently conflates Mary Magdalene, the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair and the woman caught in adultery. The video also contains an implicit reference to baptism and includes a brief appearance of St Theodosia.[[49]](#footnote-49) There is much in the lyrics that warrants theological analysis, but the recurring phrase that stands out is ‘Jesus is my virtue, but Judas is the demon I cling to.’ A first, I suggest superficial, reading of this is as an expression of the tension between ‘the good I want’ and ‘the evil I do not want’ that Paul describes in Romans 7. There is, however, none of Paul’s regret played out in the song; instead it seems to be a rejection of the binary opposition of good and evil on the basis of which Christian tradition condemns Judas as the embodiment of sinfulness. This makes sense of the stoning, at the end of the video, of Gaga as Mary Magdalene, here conflated with the woman caught in adultery of John 8. Jesus, of course, let the woman go free; but Christianity has been quick to judge, and often today appears eager to condemn those falling outside a narrow vision of purity and goodness. This is the theological language of ‘Jesus Christo’ that Gaga does not and will not speak. Instead, ‘Judas’ offers a more inclusive theological vision that embraces rather than suppresses the shadow side that Judas represents. Musically, this theological vision is reflected in the tension between the catchy, memorable and ‘pure-pop’ chorus that celebrates the innocence of the holy fool alongside the heavier breakdown which ‘has elements of the hardest techno and... dubstep’.[[50]](#footnote-50) This musical dialectic between an apparently light, innocent pop and darker, heavier musical forms permeates her work and takes on theological significance in the light of this reading of ‘Judas’.

If the discussion so far has demonstrated the considerable theological influence on her most politically significant album, what follows looks in more detail at a less obviously theological song from the album, ‘The Edge of Glory’. As well as demonstrating the fruitfulness of engaging Lady Gaga as public theologian, this demonstrates that the theological influence runs deeper than the mere superficial reference to Christian themes. ‘The Edge of Glory’ is a theologically evocative phrase suggesting an encounter with the divine mystery that is both imminent and marginal. That initial theological promise, however, is not immediately fulfilled when one looks at the rest of the lyrics, an initial reading of which probably suggests that it is basically about sex:

There ain't no reason you and me should be alone

Tonight, yeah, baby!

And I got a reason that you're who should take me home tonight

I need a man that thinks it's right when it's so wrong

Tonight, yeah, baby!

Right on the limits where we know we both belong tonight.

Not that sex is uninteresting theologically, but the lyrics don’t seem to be saying anything particularly theological about it. In fact, apart from a passing reference to truth there is no real hint of anything theological in the lyrics at all and an initial encounter with the video only seems to confirm this. The video has Gaga in a leather studded corset from Gianni Versace’s final collection, moving in and out of her bedroom window, dancing sensually on the fire escape and pavement, pausing only briefly to sit with saxophonist Clarence Clemons on the stairs to the apartment building. The red glow surrounding the action at various points does nothing to detract from the apparently overt sexuality of the performance. Clearly, then, sexuality is not absent as a theme of the song when viewed through the lens of the video. Is the reference to ‘glory’, then, a simple sublimation of transcendence to the sexual?

A closer examination suggests that there is much more to it than this: the song seems to be an extended celebration of liminality. In his study of ritual Victor Turner develops the concept of the liminal as more than just a description of the transitional phase of a rite of passage, the initial use of the concept. It can describe a whole range of human activity in which people find themselves ‘betwixt and between’.[[51]](#footnote-51) It is a concept evoked by the phrase ‘The Edge of Glory’: the *limen*, threshold of glory.

In the video, all the action takes place in a window, on the fire escape on the side of an apartment building, on the stairs, or on the pavement: liminal places all, betwixt and between, transitional rather than resting places. It takes place at night, liminal time between two days. But what does it mean? That the song is open to a remarkable range of interpretations is evidenced by discussion in the contemporary coffee shops of the wild, electronic public sphere. One fan comments:

I always thought it was about reaching accomplishments and goals. I work with special ed teenagers and it makes me think of them when they accomplish something really big, or really small, well small to you and me maybe.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Others see it as being about living life to the full:

The song is simply about standing on the edge and living [your love life] to the fullest.

"The moment of truth" refers to the time spent between Heaven, Earth, and Hell (judgement day, etc.)

"I'm on the edge of something final we call life, tonight" is about living every day like it's your last.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The particular way in which life can be lived to the full is often understood, as here, in terms of love, sex and intimacy. But other readings include an interpretation of the song as about Lady Gaga’s solidarity with young people feeling suicidal on account of their sexual orientation. In that reading, the theme of sexuality is more nuanced.

Lying behind some of these interpretations is the background to the song given in an interview by Gaga herself, in which she reveals that she wrote the song about her grandfather on the point of death; he was, that is, on the edge of ‘going to glory’. This being a religious way of describing death, the possibility of a theological reading is strengthened, even if it has been overlaid by a range of other meanings.

The interviewer observes:

On the basis of the first single it seemed like the album would all be about sexuality and freedom … but of course the other side of the ‘Born This Way’ single was the religious aspect, and the religious side is the one that resonates equally through the album.

She responds:

Yes. And rites of passage. Even with ‘The Edge Of Glory’ the time of death is seen as being a quite religious experience, to a lot of people. There are a lot of things like that on the record.[[54]](#footnote-54)

This brief response brings together three things: death, religion and rites of passage, all related to liminality. In the face of the liminal experience of her grandfather’s death, interpreted religiously, she writes a song celebrating the liminal. But what is the significance of the liminal? In the video it is portrayed as a space in which we are free to be the people that God has made us to be. If that seems a rather different interpretation from the initial readings I suggested might be generated, the basis of this reading needs articulating. This is a video very different from the big productions of her other videos[[55]](#footnote-55) and its simplicity is significant. One commentator observes that the sort of dancing she is engaging in here is what people do at home on their own in front of the mirror: ‘This is the kind of dance you do that feels big in your body, but would look small, ridiculous, would shame you if anyone caught it on film.’[[56]](#footnote-56)

The liminal space of thevideo, on this reading, is a space marked by freedom for self-expression and discovery, for being who you want to be and ‘loving who you are’,[[57]](#footnote-57) recalling the theological foundation for that love of self in ‘Born This Way’. Reading this song in the wider hermeneutical context of the album, then, this explicitly theological affirmation of individuality gives credence to the recognition of a more implicit theological dimension to the liminal space of ‘The Edge of Glory’. The encounter with death can awaken a sense of the transcendent, the beyond which is the horizon against which life is lived in all its fullness.

The celebration of liminality comes to a climax four minutes into the video at what seems to be a highly charged moment where she kisses the ground, a gesture expressing a sensual, almost sacramental embrace of this liminal space as embodied in the city, specifically her New York home and its vibrant club scene, something celebrated in ‘Marry the Night’, the opening song on the album. Perhaps even that ‘night’, the night of the club scene is also given theological significance by the night which represents the end of life, the horizon of death that inspires us to live life to the full. We need only think of the classic hymn ‘The Day Thou Gavest’ for that double meaning of night. In kissing the pavement, then, she embraces the liminal place as a space where God can be encountered: an affirmation of transcendence on the margins, the edge of glory.

In the account of the Last Supper in John’s Gospel, when Judas goes out we read that ‘it was night’. Judas goes out into the night, into liminal space, to the edge. Gaga marries the night, the place where the monsters dwell, as noted by Richard Kearney:

Strangers, gods and monsters are the central characters of my story. Their favourite haunts are those phantasmal boundaries where maps run out, ships slip mornings and navigators click their compasses shut. No man’s land. Land’s end. Out there, as the story goes, ‘where the wild things are’. These figures of Otherness occupy the frontier zone where reason falters and fantasies flourish. Strangers, gods and monsters represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Although not using the language of liminality, Kearney’s articulation of ‘other’ space in terms of divine and human monstrosity is another indication of a theological dimension to ‘The Edge of Glory’ and of a worldview in which Jesus and Judas are part of one reality. What is it, though, that is so significant about this liminal place where strangers, gods and monsters dwell? Liminal space is characterised by freedom and Gaga describes her whole lifestyle as ‘just part of this one big giant performance art statement of liberation’.[[59]](#footnote-59)

The theme of freedom is also seen in the music itself. Contemporary dance music often contains a breakdown, a point where the underlying beat stops, the music and dancers seemingly suspended in time. Here the breakdown is combined with a saxophone solo, culminating in the pavement kiss. The breakdown creates a liminal space within the music, a musical threshold across which we move to experience the edge more fully. In this song the filling of that space with a saxophone solo further signifies the freedom which is a central theme of the album.

In light of the ambivalence to religion noted above, to find a theology that resonates with Gaga’s own religious understanding an obvious source, given her commitment to LGBT equality, is queer theology. One commentator observes that ‘the Gaga persona is deeply embedded in a vibrant, queer, theological tradition that is as old as Christianity itself, and as relevant now as ever.’[[60]](#footnote-60) On the topic of freedom, Grace Jantzen’s reflections on the ‘lesbian rule’ are suggestive.[[61]](#footnote-61) The lesbian rule is an architectural measuring device, originating from the island of Lesbos, and used for measuring curves or odd shapes that don’t fit into the usual perpendicular structures of most forms of measurement. Jantzen uses this image to develop a vision for a queer theology that allows space for greater freedom and diversity than traditional theological methods. To exercise this freedom, Jantzen argues, requires an ‘aesthetics of the self’:

Those who already take up queer positions have some extra practice in the creativity and the cost of an aesthetics of the self. We are learning how to dig deep into our best possibilities, and not to allow ourselves to become flat mirrors of our contexts, reflecting and reinforcing its self-perceptions. By deliberately adopting a lesbian rule, the mirror we hold up to our culture, religious and secular, is a mirror of curves and corners that reveals the multiple distortions of discursive and material reality.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Here, then, is a Gaga theology with its vision of human beings in relation to God being ‘as free as my hair’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Or, quoting Jantzen again, ‘an aesthetics of the self is an effort to enable flourishing from within, not by some superimposed rigid frame.’[[64]](#footnote-64) Again, Gaga would concur: there is no ‘superimposed rigid frame’ and we are encouraged to flourish ‘from within’ (we were born this way).[[65]](#footnote-65) But what of the rigid economic frame of globalisation which the music industry supports? Or, to recall Adorno’s critique, is this genuine freedom or pseudo-individualisation?

Such concerns need addressing, both because all theology must be subject to critical discussion and because global capitalism has a particular propensity to undermine real liberty with illusions of freedom. Two critical questions present themselves here. The first relates to Adorno’s critique: can you actually promote real human freedom without an understanding of community, without a conception of how human beings relate to one another as different? Or, to put it another way, whilst Lady Gaga seeks to create a space for otherness and difference to flourish and be accepted, she doesn’t in her music have any way of holding these differences together. From the critical perspective of a theologian she could be said to lack an ecclesiology. This is where the dialogue between popular music and religious classics is important. Anselm Min, a theologian deeply rooted in the Christian classic, has used these roots to critique the postmodern affirmation of otherness and difference in Levinas and Derrida as lacking an account of how we might live together *as* different. Min proposes an ecclesiologically grounded vision of ‘a solidarity of others’ as a truly liberative space for human freedom and flourishing. This is the sort of ecclesial space that is undermined by what William Cavanaugh has called the false catholicity of globalisation,[[66]](#footnote-66) an observation that raises the question of whether Lady Gaga’s powerfully articulated vision of individual freedom is in fact undermined by her embrace of the medium of globalized mass popular culture.

A second area of critique concerns the way she speaks about her fans, albeit sometimes quite movingly, in a way that could be seen as homogenising. When she talks about ‘my fans’ tending to cry a lot or ‘my fans’ as having certain characteristics in common, are they in fact becoming a homogenized global commodity, part of this product of mass popular culture?

This highlights Adorno’s discussion of ‘emotional listeners’ who ‘consume music in order to be allowed to weep’:

Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, “Come and weep, my child.” It is catharsis for the masses, but catharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line. One who weeps does not resist any more than one who marches. Music that permits its listeners the confession of their unhappiness reconciles them, by means of this “release,” to their social dependence.’[[67]](#footnote-67)

I have criticized Lady Gaga for lacking an ecclesiological dimension and potentially generating, in place of an ecclesiologically grounded ‘solidarity of others’, an emotional dependency which promises what it can’t deliver, being based on the false catholicity of globalized mass popular culture. But I want to finish this discussion on a positive note with some evidence that counters this criticism.

Lady Gaga’s fans are known as ‘little monsters’ and she is known as ‘Mother Monster’ in a relationship that sees her concerned for those seen as alien others and treated as scapegoats. This concern is expressed in the 2012 launch of the Born This Way Foundation which, led by Lady Gaga and her mother, ‘is committed to supporting the wellness of young people […] connecting young people in safe ways and empowering them with the skills and opportunities that will inspire them to create a kinder and braver world.’[[68]](#footnote-68) So, whilst this aspect may be lacking in her music, it may be there in the activities of her foundation and the local partner organisations with which it works. It is, then, her social and political activism underpinned by the theological vision of *Born This Way* that justifies the description of Gaga as a public theologian with which I began.

What has been learned from this case study? Firstly that, far from being superficial, an engagement with popular music can open up a rich theological and critical conversation about important contemporary issues. Secondly, that this conversation causes the theologian to explore a range of theological resources within their own tradition and to see them in a new light and with new significance. We may describe this exploration after David Tracy as a ‘journey of intensification’ into the Christian classic.[[69]](#footnote-69) Thirdly, that these theological resources are ones that, as a result of the process by which they are discovered, have the potential to be heard in the wild public sphere. It is the theorisation of that sphere as the space in which this theological dialogue takes place and has public significance that forms the final stage of my argument.

# Popular Theology in the Wild Public sphere

So far I hope to have demonstrated the theological significance of Lady Gaga’s pop art. The importance of this for specifically *public* theology depends on how that discipline is understood and, in particular, on what is meant by ‘public’. In discussions of ‘publicness’ the word can have a range of meanings: public squares and public spheres are not necessarily the same reality, and public reason in a more technical sense[[70]](#footnote-70) is different from the performative reasoning of minority publics struggling for freedom and justice. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas, the final section of this article elaborates an understanding of the public sphere that accounts for the dialogue that I have been pursuing as a form of public theology.

Habermas’s concern with the public sphere goes back to his first major published work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,[[71]](#footnote-71) in which he outlines the historical development of a literary public sphere which formed the basis of a political public sphere in which rational-critical debate emerged as, ultimately, the basis of rational legislation. The historical development being described by Habermas leads to a normative status for the public sphere which he describes as ‘a functional element in the political realm [which] was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs.’[[72]](#footnote-72) The rational debate taking place in the public sphere was to lead to legislation based on universal reason, not on the assertion of the will, either of one or of many. Even at this early stage of his work, however, Habermas was conscious of the anomaly that the public sphere, although theoretically open to all, was in fact only open to the educated property owner.

If the rise of the public sphere in this account is not free from such anomalies, then its fall undermines its crucial place in a democratic polity even more markedly. To put the argument concisely: the path which is trodden in the course of subsequent transformations of the public sphere takes us ‘from a public critically reflecting on its culture to one that merely consumes it’.[[73]](#footnote-73) There is not space here to consider those subsequent transformations in detail, but most significant for our purposes is the emergence of mass culture. Habermas’s pessimistic conclusion is that

mass culture has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.[[74]](#footnote-74)

In relation to popular music, this is the sort of critique of mass culture that underlies Theodor Adorno’s profoundly pessimistic conception of popular music. Habermas is equally concerned about the influence of mass culture on the public sphere. The parallels between Adorno’s argument and the concerns expressed in Habermas’s early work are clear. Similar transformations of the literary public sphere have, for Habermas, undermined the political potential contained in the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. He offers the following sobering diagnosis:

The sounding board of an educated stratum tutored in the public use of reason has been shattered; the public is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use nonpublicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical.[[75]](#footnote-75)

With the effective loss of a literary public sphere, an arena for the formation of critical public opinion and therefore of a political public sphere, has been lost: ‘Critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity.’[[76]](#footnote-76) There is little left, he thinks, of a genuinely discursive public sphere, although the conclusion of the book leaves open the question of whether the public sphere is again ‘open to substantive change’.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Habermas’s early understanding has been extensively criticized, not least for its overly rational conception of the public sphere. From a feminist perspective, Nancy Fraser has argued that his failure ‘to examine other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres’ means ‘that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Fraser uses examples of alternative publics to show that right from the beginning of the idea of publicity it was a plural reality, publics, suppressed by a singular concept.[[79]](#footnote-79) Fraser concludes that we can ‘no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

Fraser’s critical theory of actually existing democracy argues that ‘subaltern counterpublics’[[81]](#footnote-81)are key to expanding the discursive space in stratified societies and that multiple publics are a necessary feature of egalitarian, multicultural societies, enabling participants to speak in their own voice. To relate this to our discussion of popular music, Rap can be seen as giving voice to an African American counterpublic whilst Lady Gaga gives a strong public voice to queer counterpublics.[[82]](#footnote-82)

But what sort of voices are these and how are they heard? Other critiques of Habermas’s early conception have used the notion of carnival in Bakhtin’s literary theory to challenge the sort of communication that characterizes the public sphere. Michael Gardiner questions the idea of the public sphere as a ‘realm of sober and virtuous debate’ which, he says, has never really existed in European history, arguing that ‘the marketplace and public square in early modern times were witness to a tumultuous intermingling of diverse social groups and widely divergent styles and idioms of language’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Ken Hirschkop has also used Bakhtin to develop a more theatrical conception of the public sphere seen as the meeting point between individuals and the political realm, a sphere in which the life issues faced by private people can be dramatized, [[84]](#footnote-84) a conception particularly pertinent in relation to Lady Gaga for whom the theatrical and carnivalesque is not just a promotional ploy but a key artistic feature.

In the critiques of Fraser, Gardiner and Hirschkop, an enriched conception of the public sphere emerges, one characterized by a plurality of overlapping and inter-related publics and diverse modes and topics of communication. Wild publics and subaltern counterpublics define this postmodern approach to publicity.

Habermas’s own major re-engagement with the topic of the public sphere comes in his discourse theory of democracy where it is understood in relation to the processes of communication required for democratic legitimacy. Since his first foray into a theory of the public sphere in 1962, the idea retains its considerable theoretical significance and analytical power, having been modified in response to critics to provide a much more dynamic, embodied, plural and diverse conception. The extent of this modification can be seen in this description of the public sphere as an essential resource for political life:

The publics of parliamentary bodies … rely … on the *context of discovery* provided by a procedurally unregulated public sphere that is borne by the general public of citizens. This “weak” public is the vehicle of “public opinion”. The opinion-formation uncoupled from decisions is effected in an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries. Within a framework guaranteed by constitutional rights, the structures of such a pluralistic public sphere develop more or less spontaneously. The currents of public communication are channelled by mass media and flow through different publics that develop informally inside associations. Taken together, they form a “wild” complex that resists organization as a whole.[[85]](#footnote-85)

I have quoted Habermas at length here because this passage shows clearly how his own understanding of the public sphere, whilst remaining central to his theory of democracy, has been modified substantially to take account of the debate his theory has generated. What we have in the later Habermas, then, is a richer, ‘wilder’, more diverse public sphere characterized by a ‘polyphonic complexity of public voices’.[[86]](#footnote-86) Among these are theological voices, *and* the voices of popular culture, in which the theopolitical significance of Lady Gaga begins to make sense in a discussion of public theology. As if alert to this point, Habermas specifically includes ‘rock concerts’ within these later statements of his theory of the public sphere. It is worth quoting him at length again on this point:

the public sphere is differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range - from the *episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the *occasional* or “arranged” publics of particular presentations and events, such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the *abstract* public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media. [[87]](#footnote-87)

Here the optimistic glimmer in the midst of the overriding pessimism which concluded *The Structural Transformation* has been kindled into flame. A range of cultural expressions is included in his vision of the public sphere alongside political and religious gatherings. This establishes a public context for the theological engagement with popular culture: theologians and artists, the producers of popular culture, are already public, being present in the public sphere, their voices part of the polyphony. What has not yet been established, though, is a rationale for theologians engaging with the texts of popular culture. We noted that in Habermas’s pessimistic conclusion to *The Structural Transformation*, he has discerned a shift from a public that critically reflects on culture to one that merely consumes it, a critique of popular culture he shares with Adorno. Professional public theologians can contribute to the public sphere by being among those who critically reflect on culture, including that popular culture which is particularly prone to being merely consumed, bringing theological insights to bear in the public conversation. Equally, by engaging with the texts of popular music, and popular culture more widely, public theology gains a source of challenge and critique to its own attempts to interpret the Christian classics in relation to pressing contemporary concerns.

The theological engagement with popular music should not be seen, however, as attempting to tame the ‘wild’ public sphere. Theological readings of popular music, whilst critical, should not be neat, fixed and stable, but playful, heuristic, and open ended. Yet they are a potential source of wisdom and generative of liberative insight and praxis, including at the level of the political.

# Conclusion

What has been proposed here is a conception of the public sphere as a wild and plural space between the private and the political, characterized by a polyphony or carnival of texts that people interpret, often either explicitly or implicitly in relation to one another. I have argued that one such dialogical reading is a theological reading of popular music. This leads to a model of the public sphere in which religious texts are interpreted alongside a range of other texts, the texts of popular music as exemplified by Lady Gaga being one important example. The particular significance of Lady Gaga as public theologian, it has been argued, lies in her use of theology to promote a particular socio-political agenda. If public theology is understood as theology engaging explicitly in a public sphere characterized by textual polyphony then, under the conditions of hypermodernity, David Tracy’s notion of the ‘classic’ is important but insufficient: the transient, apparently superficial texts of popular music are a significant feature of the polyphonic public sphere in hypermodernity and theology cannot avoid such texts when interpreting its own ‘classics’ in that context. Public theology must do its work in dialogue with the wild texts of wild publics. And they don’t come much wilder than Lady Gaga.

1. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 307 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tracy emphatically rejects elitist notions of a classic and allows that popular music can achieve classic status but, even so, the music of Lady Gaga is unlikely to be recognized (yet) as one of those ‘expressions of the human spirit’ that ‘so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status.’ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p. 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘On Popular Music’, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, 437-69 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), p. 458 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adorno, ‘On Popular Music’, p. 444 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here is his definition: ‘By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or “pre-digested.”’Adorno, ‘On Popular Music’, p. 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Adorno, ‘On Popular Music’, pp. 460*ff* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Music in the Background’, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, 506-510 ( Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A seminal text, for example, devotes a whole chapter to Adorno: Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), Chapter 2 ‘‘It’s all over now’. Popular music and mass culture – Adorno’s theory’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, The Sacred, & The Profane* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 31-36 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alexis Petridis in *The Guardian*, 9th July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/09/years-years-communion-review> [Accessed 13/07/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 295 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts, *Personal Jesus: how popular music shapes our souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Carey Walsh, ‘Shout-Outs to the Creator: The Use of Biblical Themes in Rap Lyrics’, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25.2 (2013), 230-248, p.232 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Daniel White Hodge, ‘Baptized in Dirty Water: Locating the Gospel of Tupac Amaru Shakur in the Post-Soul Context’ in Tom Beaudoin, ed., *Secular Music and Sacred Theology* (Collegeville, MA: Liturgical Press, 2013), p.127 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Daniel White Hodge, ‘No Church in the Wild: Hip Hop Theology and Mission’, *Missiology: An International Review* 4.1, 9 -109 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hodge, ‘Baptized in Dirty Water’, p.145 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jay Z, ‘Pray’, *American Gangster* (Roc-A-Fella, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jay Z and Kanye West, ‘No Church in the Wild’, *Watch The Throne* (Roc-A-Fella, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kanye West, ‘Jesus Walks’, *The College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella, 2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kanye West, ‘I am a God’, *Yeezus* (Def Jam, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Kanye West, ‘Jesus Walks’ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Beyoncé, *Lemonade* (Columbia, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Beyoncé, ‘Run the World (Girls)’ , *4,* (Columbia, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Beyoncé, ‘Ave Maria’ , *I Am... Sasha Fierce,* (Columbia, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Chine McDonald, ‘Beyoncé’s Psalms: the Theology of Lemonade’, *threads*, 10th May 2016, <https://www.threadsuk.com/beyonces-psalms> [Accessed 11/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sara Amis, ‘Beyoncé and Making Theology Out of Lemonade’, *A Word to the Witch (Patheos Pagan Chanel)*, 2nd May 2016 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/awordtothewitch/2016/05/02/beyonce-and-making-theology-out-of-lemonade/> [Accessed 11/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Courtney Lee, ‘Beyoncé, Lemonade and a Womanist Theology’, *Women in Theology* 25th April 2016 <https://womenintheology.org/2016/04/25/beyonce-lemonade-and-a-womanist-theology/> [Accessed 11/07/16]; Yolanda Pierce, ‘Black Women and the Sacred: With “Lemonade,” Beyoncé takes us to Church’, *Religion Dispatches* 3rd May 2016 <http://religiondispatches.org/black-women-and-the-sacred-beyonce-takes-us-to-church/> [Accessed 8/7/16]; [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Candice Benbow, ‘Beyoncé’s “Lemonade” and Black Christian Women’s Spirituality’, *Religion & Politics: Fit For Polite Company* 28th June 2016 <http://religionandpolitics.org/2016/06/28/beyonces-lemonade-and-black-christian-womens-spirituality/> [Accessed 11/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. bell hooks, ‘Moving Beyond Pain’, *bell hooks institute*, 9th May 2016 <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain> [Accessed 11/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Victor P. Corona, ‘Memory, Monsters and Lady Gaga’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 46:4 (2013), 725-744, p.725 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Corona, ‘Memory, Monsters and Lady Gaga’, p.726 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Richard J. Gray II, ed., *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012)*, p.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Martin Iddon and Melanie L. Marshall, eds., *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. ‘Established in March 2010 as the first mover in Gaga studies, **Gaga Stigmata: Critical Writings and Art About Lady Gaga** is a technological journal that critically-creatively participates in the cultural project of shock pop phenomenon Lady Gaga. Keeping with the spirit of our zeitgeist, Gaga Stigmata moves at the speed of pop.’ *<*http://gagajournal.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 6/7/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Jack Halberstam *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This Habermasian conception of the public sphere is discussed in the final section of the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Michael Gilmour has written specifically on Bob Dylan and, more widely, on the post-1960s American popular music scene, his focus being almost entirely on lyrics: ‘I reduce albums and songs to lyrics’, Michael J. Gilmour *Gods and Guitars: Seeking the Sacred in Post-1960s Popular Music* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), p.x; Michael Gilmour *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: the old, old story for modern times* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), an approach which is enriched by the presence of Walter Benjamin as a third dialogue partner; and Michael Gilmour (ed.) *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (New York, London: Continuum, 2005). Others include Jeffrey B. Symyncywicz *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption from Asbury Park to Magic* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Steve Stockman *Walk on: the Spiritual Quest of U2* (Lake Mary: Relevant Media Group, 2005); Steve Stockman *The Rock Cries Out: Discovering* E*ternal Truth in Unlikely Music* (Lake Mary: Relevant Media Group, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, p.vi. In this second volume of the trilogy Brown devotes Chapter 6 specifically to ‘Pop Music’, which also features in the chapter on ‘Blues, Musicals and Opera’ (Chapter 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Beckford, *Jesus Dub*, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Marsh and Roberts, *Personal Jesus* [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ‘Born This Way’, *Born This Way* (Interscope Records, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ‘Americano’, *Born This Way* (Interscope Records, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The song was written against the background of the overturning of Proposition 8 (banning gay marriage) in California, and controversial border issues. *MTV News*, 23rd May 2011<http://www.mtv.com/news/1664429/lady-gaga-americano-born-this-way/ > [Accessed 19/7/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Jonathan Van Meter, ‘Lady Gaga: Our Lady of Pop’, *Vogue* 10th Feb 2011 <http://www.vogue.com/865458/lady-gaga-our-lady-of-pop/> [Accessed 08/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. ‘Lady Gaga, 'Born This Way' Exclusive Album First Listen, *NME Blogs*, 21st April 2011  
    <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/lady-gaga-born-this-way-exclusive-album-first-listen> [Accessed 08/07/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Gagagraphy: Gaga, “Judas,” and Saint Theodosia <http://gagajournal.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/gagagraphy-gaga-judas-and-saint.html> [Accessed 7/7/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Dan Martin, ‘Lady Gaga “Judas” Review - The Song She Should've Come Back With’, *NME* *Blogs* 15th April 2011 <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/lady-gaga-judas-review-the-song-she-shouldve-come-back-with> [Accessed 7/7/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/3530822107858858592/> [Accessed 13/05/15], brackets original. The use of this source for interpretations is simply to indicate the wide range of readings that the song has generated. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. ‘Lady Gaga interview: “I looked to my past and my faith to find bravery in myself”’, *Popjustice*, 23rd May 2011 < http://www.popjustice.com/interviewsandfeatures/an-interview-with-lady-gaga/84204/#ixzz2YAg1ShM7> [Accessed 13/05/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. As one commentator has put it: ‘Here’s what Lady Gaga’s “The Edge of Glory” video hasn’t got: mutations, aliens, monsters, surgically enhanced cheekbones, twitching, Frankenstein body stutters, mucoid goo, doctors, headpieces, prison guards, fey lovers, poison, intergalactic birth machines, Dante-esque tectonic underground hellscapes, guns, machineguns, boobguns, clones, costume changes, motorized apostles, metallic crustaceans, pink hair, blow-up orcas for faking making-out, sexy men in cartoon wolf heads passed out on toilets, Beyonce, back-up dancers, a narrative.’ Danielle Pafunda, ‘Into the Groove of Lady Gaga’s “The Edge of Glory,” a Phenomenological Inquiry’ <http://gagajournal.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/into-groove-of-lady-gagas-edge-of-glory.html> [Accessed 13/05/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Danielle Pafunda, ‘Into the Groove’ [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Lady Gaga, ‘Born this Way’ [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting otherness* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. "[A]ll the things that I think about and the way that I am, it's my lifestyle, it's just part of this one big giant performance art statement of liberation. So, I hope that you feel tonight, as free as your hair. And to those of you that don't feel free, take the best opportunity to free yourselves.” <http://newsroom.mtv.com/2012/05/22/lady-gaga-responds-to-religious-protests-manila-concert-video/> [Accessed 13/05/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Xarissa Holdaway, ‘Idol Worship: The Beattitudes of Lady Gaga’, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2013/02/19/idol-worship-the-beatitudes-of-lady-gaga/> [Accessed 13/05/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Grace Jantzen, ‘Contours of a Queer Theology’ *Literature and Theology* 15.3 (2001), 276-285 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Jantzen ‘Contours of a Queer Theology’, p. 282 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ‘Hair’, *Born This Way* (Interscope Records, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Jantzen, ‘Contours of a Queer Theology’, p. 284 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. If the ‘born this way’ trope seems to suggest any sort of biological determinism, then the references to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* in the extraordinary opening sequence of the video for that song suggest that the ability to create different identities is more fundamental than anything biological. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. ‘On Popular Music’, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, 437-69 ( Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 461-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Born This Way Foundation Website <http://bornthisway.foundation/about-the-foundation> [Accessed 13/07/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p. 125 *et passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Such as that used by John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Stransformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 250 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109-142, at p. 115 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, pp. 115-6, referring to Mary P. Ryan *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, p.116 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. This is her term for the alternative publics formed by ‘women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians’, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, p.123 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. For some of the ways in which Lady Gaga has given voice to this counterpublic, see Jase Peeples’ account: ‘12 Reasons Lady Gaga Deserves Our 'Applause'’ at <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/music/2013/08/20/12-reasons-lady-gaga-deserves-applause> [Accessed: 21/7/15] [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Michael E. Gardiner ‘Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere’ in Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas*, p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ken Hirschkop ‘Justice and drama: on Bakhtin as a complement to Habermas’ in Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas*, p. 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 307, italicsoriginal. Habermas specifically acknowledges the influence of Nancy Fraser in a footnote to this passage. The importance of equality in the public sphere, also asserted by Fraser, is acknowledged in Habermas’s developed understanding. Throwing off ‘the millennia-old shackles of social stratification is necessary to realise ‘the potential of an unleashed cultural pluralism’. (p.307) This rather dynamic vision is markedly different to the bourgeois public sphere of the earlier Habermas. Though not referenced, the mention of a ‘wild complex’ seems to echo the Bakhtinian critique of Gardiner et al discussed above. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Jürgen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, *European Journal of Philosophy,* 14.1 (2006), 1–25, at.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 374 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)