

QUEER THOUGHTS ON COUNTRY MUSIC AND k.d. lang

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Mockus, Martha. "Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang." In *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, edited by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 257 -71. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

I HAVE NEVER BEEN A FAN OF COUNTRY MUSIC. I find I am vaguely aware of who's who in country, but I have never experienced a great desire to listen to country tunes or cultivate a taste for any particular country musicians. I was not attracted to the nasal and twangy sounds of country music, nor was I interested in its strict presentations of gender and sexuality; I just could not be bothered to give country music a fair shake.

Then there was k.d. lang. Since I did not follow country music in the first place, I did not become aware of lang until the release of her 1989 album *Absolute Torch and Twang*. Some of my lesbian and gay friends raved about her, but I only halfheartedly paid attention. I was also suspicious of the lesbian hero-worship of lang that often appeared in the queer press. Why were so many dykes drooling over a *country* music singer? It just did not make sense to me, nor did it appeal to me. I did not care if she created a powerful lesbian aura onstage or sported a cute butch style; I was not interested in her music. However, when I finally listened to her tune "Pullin' Back the Reins," I was amazed and deeply moved by her voice. I had to have more. I was fascinated not only by the power, range, and depth of her voice, but by the wonderful mixture of passion and mischief in her singing; and I thoroughly enjoyed the tight and playful sound of her band, the reclines. Country music—in the hands of lang—could be fun after all. I realized I had taken myself a bit too seriously, and I had taken country music too seriously. I was not necessarily inclined to listen to other country artists, but I was certainly excited about spending more time with lang's music.

So I did. And the pleasure I experience with lang's music has a great deal

to do with my lesbianism *and* my previous distaste for country music. Thus, motivated by both suspicion and affection, I will engage some of her tunes within a context that includes lesbian identity and sexuality (mine and hers), the aesthetics of lesbian camp and the butch-femme dynamic, the reception of lang in the country music industry, and the fairly recent appropriation of country music by lesbian and gay bar culture.

steering clear of “the queer”

I still receive a lot of resistance about the way I look. Particularly from the traditional country quarters. Still, I think it’s loosened up a bit. Unfortunately, human beings evolve slowly. (k.d. lang, 1990)¹

In the final chapter of *Country Music, U.S.A.*, Bill Malone describes the various trends that developed in country music in the 1970s and early 1980s.² He begins his discussion by noting that debates about country music—what it is, to whom, and why—have played a significant role within country music scenes since the 1970s, and the various sides of these debates are played out in the music, marketing strategies, and political alliances of the country artists themselves. He states:

Musicians, industry leaders, and fans have been confused about what the music is or where it should go. The country music industry has discovered that its best interests lie in the distribution of a package with clouded identity, possessing no regional traits. The industry has striven to present a music that is all things to all people: middle-of-the-road and “American,” but also southern, working-class, and occasionally youth-oriented and even rebellious in tone.³

According to Malone, many country musicians in the 1970s and early 1980s worked to revive “traditional” country music—and thereby protect it from the poison of pop music—while others successfully developed “progressive” sounds and crossover strategies.⁴ The discussions of country musical style(s) published in the bimonthly magazine *Country Music* indicate that issues of “traditionalism” are still debated and fiercely defended.

However, even though musical “traditionalism” was not a central concern for all country musicians and critics in the 1970s and early 1980s, the traditional representations of gender and sexuality in country music certainly remained unchallenged. If other genres of mainstream popular music allowed for a minimal queer presence, country music made no such

allowance whatsoever. Guys are guys, gals are gals, and anything queer is entirely exscripted. Even if many country tunes valorize “cheatin’” or other forms of illicit sex, the scenario is *always* heterosexual. Furthermore, the ideologies of patriotism and the nuclear family merge in the world of country music and intensify its homophobic practice. Of course, I speak as one who has been resistant to personal participation in country music, but the discourse of country music as I read it remains decidedly antiqueer.

This homophobic discourse has been thrown into total confusion by the fairly recent appropriation of country and western music in the lesbian and gay bar scenes. Cultural critic B. Ruby Rich argues that lesbian androgyny was expressed quite comfortably in country and western bars:

In the ‘70s, when lesbianism took androgyny as both principle and style, the country-and-western bar was one of the only welcoming sites outside of the womyn’s community. It was there, to those honky-tonk joints, that women could always go in flannel shirts and jeans and no makeup, raise no eyebrows, even dance with a girlfriend alongside all the straight country gals doing the same.⁵

Since the mid-1980s, gay and lesbian bars in major American cities have featured “country music nights” complete with line dances, square dances, and two-stepping. Although this was never unusual in cities such as Denver, Austin, and Houston, the trend reached new heights particularly in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and the Twin Cities. The Rawhide II in San Francisco and the Town House in St. Paul are completely country and western gay bars (and the Town House claims a clientele of half gay men and half lesbians). For many lesbians and gay men, hanging out and dancing to country music was and is a preferable alternative to the disco scene (either classic 1970s disco or its various 1980s derivatives). As DJ and general manager of the Townhouse, Steven Anderson puts it:

Like the disco phenomenon, country music rekindled an interest in dancing—albeit to a different beat and a different style. The Texas two-step. Yes, it was the style of dance that seemed particularly appealing. And in the age of AIDS—when people are becoming more and more afraid to touch—I find it especially encouraging that country-western dancing incorporates an acceptable format for tactile pleasure...for being sensual without being sexual.⁶

And unlike the elaborate and far-flung fantasies of disco, the themes and scenarios presented in many country songs are often quite square, conservative, and downright sentimental.

What interests me in particular about this penchant for sentimentality,

which one will not find in great doses in rap or metal, is that it coincided with the rise of the Reagan/Bush era and its propagandized image of America as morally upstanding, respectable, white, family-oriented, and hardworking: a “traditional,” back-to-basics homophobic conservatism that wished the 1960s and 1970s had never happened. Thus, I find the queer participation in country and western music, as it exists in the bars, both disturbing and quite wonderful. Disturbing because it seems to buy right into the conservative project of Reagan/Bush “American traditionalism,” which consequently erases queerness and allows straight society to continue to ignore and/or bash gay people. Wonderful because it enacts a massive critique of this project, seeing through its ridiculous falseness by delighting in the dorkiness of country music—in short, turning country into camp. For instance, the strict gender definition presented in country music provides excellent material for queer drag and butch-femme role-playing among both lesbians and gay men. Furthermore, the queer appropriation of country and western music in the bars has intersected with gay and lesbian rodeo folks, providing a space for them to meet and celebrate queer rodeo together. (In the United States, there is the National Gay and Lesbian Rodeo Association as well as numerous regional chapters. And of course, country and western music and dancing is the primary form of bar entertainment for these folks.) In these respects, to queerify country is, in a sense, to expose and even undo its homophobic deeds.

double crossing

I think the time has come for me to let go of the idea of being a “country singer.” Country will always be a major influence on me, but I’ve also been influenced by everything from opera to Ofra Haza; and I’m not prepared to make the kind of compromises that would be necessary for me to be accepted by those people [in Nashville]. At one time I did very much want to prove to them how much I honestly loved country music, but they make their own assessments whether you’re honest or not. (k.d. lang, 1990)⁷

lang coined the phrase “torch and twang” to describe her particular musical style. “[T]he reason I chose the words ‘torch’ and ‘twang’ is that I would love to marry ballad jazz and country. Those are the types of music I’m most passionate about. People have incorporated jazz into country before, but I don’t think anyone’s dedicated their life to it.”⁸ As a crossover artist, lang has never enjoyed acceptance and airplay from the Nashville establishment or

from rock radio, although she has a big following from both country and noncountry fans. A significant proportion of her fandom consists of lesbians and gay men, particularly lesbians.

Within the dyke subculture, lang has been thoroughly celebrated for a number of reasons. The lyrics of nearly all her songs contain no masculine pronouns; rather she employs an “I-you” mode of address that invites lesbian hearings. Second, her voice is admired for its range and shades of color. For me, what gives her vocal artistry a dykish quality is its depth and power, and her remarkable ability to take advantage of many of the conventions of country singing while simultaneously critiquing them. Lastly, lang’s visual menu is enormously appealing. She challenges stereotypical presentations of gender by flaunting a consistently androgynous, if not overtly lesbian, image: nudie suits, short spiky hair, no wigs, and no makeup whatsoever. To dykes, lang’s particularly bold vocal and visual styles suggest lesbian identification.

In her cover of Wynn Stewart’s “Big Big Love,” lang assumes a masculine subject position, and yet her performance invites a number of various dyke-oriented readings.

Can’t you feel my love a-growin’
 Can’t you see it, ain’t it showin’
 Oh you must be knowin’
 I got a big big love

It’s not the kind to be concealin’
 It’s the type to be revealin’
 You must be feelin’
 I got a big big love⁹

The text of this song could suggest the “big big love” is simply that, or that it refers to a huge erection. lang’s energetic and sassy performance implies the latter, yet plays on the fact that the “big big love” can be taken several ways. Indeed, to anyone familiar with Stewart’s 1962 recording of this tune, originally entitled “Make Big Love,” lang’s version sounds deliberately raucous.¹⁰

Formally, the tune works within a standard AABA structure, and the harmony moves in a completely straightforward fashion: a I-V-I progression in each A section and a brief half cadence on V in each B section. The upbeat tempo and consistent rhythmic patterns in the guitars create a playful, intentionally innocent backdrop for the provocative image described in the vocals. In other words, the entirely regular form, harmony, and accompaniment play against the more explicit reading of the text, creating an ironic tension.

(Is she saying what I think she's saying? How can a girl have a hard-on, and why is she telling me about it?)

The shape of the melody, with its rhythmic push emphasizing the final word of each line, and the playful predictability of the rhymes (“growin,” “showin,” “knowin,” “concealin,” “revealin,” etc.), set up an ironic potential that can either be subdued or celebrated. Indeed, lang’s vocal delivery becomes increasingly tongue-in-cheek throughout the tune. Never shying away from the double entendre of the lyrics, she maintains a consistent volume level and gradually creates a mischievous effect during the repetitions of each verse. The “walkin” and “talkin” under the “great big moon above” in verse three are totally camped up by the “oohs” and “ahs” in the background, and by the nearly shouted a cappella delivery of the words “I got a big big love.” Similarly, lang sings lines two through four in the repeat of verse one in a single breath; the exaggerated growls and the melodic glides on “showin” and “knowin” are anything but innocent.

What does it mean that lang sings in a drag role, appropriating both male imagery and a masculine subject position? On one level, she conveys that women do indeed get “hard-ons,” but that descriptions of sexual arousal are too often constructed solely in terms of male anatomy. On another level, she sidesteps drag and, by toying with the notions of visibility and size, seems to suggest quite playfully the delights of female orgasm. But I hear this tune in yet a fourth way. In her article “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,”¹¹ Sue-Ellen Case argues that lesbians who dress and behave within a butch-femme dynamic do not reinforce heterosexual models of gender, but rather subvert them for their own lesbian purposes. The butch woman appropriates various codes of masculinity and displays them to the femme who simultaneously aims her “femininity” to the butch; both women contribute to the creation of a uniquely *lesbian* gender system. In addition,

[T]hese women play on the phallic economy rather than to it. Both women alter this masquerading subject’s function by positioning it [the phallus] between women and thus foregrounding the myths of penis and castration in the Freudian economy... In other words, these penis-related posturings were always acknowledged as roles, not biological birthrights, nor any other essentialist poses... These [lesbian] roles qua roles lend agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject, providing her with at least two options for gender identification and, with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it... These roles are played in signs themselves and not in ontologies.¹²

Although Case discusses the butch-femme aesthetic primarily within the

realm of theater, her conclusions can be adapted to critique the work of women performers in popular music.¹³

lang invites me to occupy the femme role suggested by the “you” in the lyrics of “Big Big Love.” Much like the butch lesbian in the butch-femme aesthetic, her version of this tune juxtaposes conventional *musical* signs—standard form, regular harmony, and predictable rhythms—with a wonderfully mischievous vocal performance, enacting a radical and dykish twist in *gender* signs.¹⁴

“Big Boned Gal” presents a far more overt expression of a woman’s affection and admiration for another woman. Apart from “women’s music,” it is highly unusual in any style of popular music to hear a woman sing about another woman who is not a mother, daughter, or sister:

put her blue dress on
and she’d curl her hair
oh she’d been waiting all week
with a bounce in her step
and a wiggle in her walk
she’d be swinging down the street

you could tell she was ready
by the look in her eye
as she slipped in through the crowd
she walked with grace
as she entered the place
ya, the big boned gal was proud¹⁵

lang sings about this “gal” with such high-spirited enthusiasm that it is no wonder that this tune never fails to generate a lively response from dykes, especially in the bars. It resonates with lesbians for a number of reasons. The narrative of dressing up, going out to dance, and being “proud” parallels the *fun* part of the coming out process—the act of coming out and flaunting it to other queer people (as opposed to straight folks), which is liberating as well as exhilarating. Furthermore, the description of the big-boned gal in verse three (“you could tell she was ready/by the look in her eyes”) recalls cruising, both on the part of lang as well as the gal: the pleasure of looking and being looked at.

Musically, lang’s vocal hiccups, yodels, quirky changes of register, and growls give this tune its exuberance and inspire my lesbian reading of it. Such vocal antics upset a rigid contour of melody thereby creating a rebelliousness that underscores the tune’s daring premise of queer affection and desire. The control and boldness with which lang jumps from high to low

and back again hardly resemble the ladylike vocal styles of Tammy Wynette, Brenda Lee, or Dolly Parton. The image of the big-boned femme and her playful attention to visual detail is met by lang's butch manner of singing.¹⁶ "Big Boned Gal" carves a space for lesbian sensibility in *sound* and heralds one of the queerest moments in country music.

camping up the corn

To be completely fair to those hostile country conservatives, lang's visual imagery has, at times, seemed like an elaborate parody of cowboy culture. She's appeared in publicity pictures striking the corniest Lone Ranger poses imaginable. "Sure," she concedes, "but to respect and to love something is also to understand the humour and absurdity in it. It is important to have fun with what you do" (Dave Jennings and k.d. lang, 1990).¹⁷

lang's sartorial statements are not all that "country conservatives" have found distasteful: her political commitment to animal rights, for example, resulted in a ban of her music on country radio stations in Kansas, Nebraska, Montana, Missouri, and Oklahoma during the summer of 1990.¹⁸ The radio stations feared a withdrawal of financial support from members of the beef industry in both Canada and the United States because lang's vegetarianism and her views in favor of animal rights were perceived as potentially harmful to the industry's well-being. She appeared in a television commercial promoting vegetarianism that was sponsored by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.¹⁹ Nothing in her *music*, however, reflects her political stance on animals. The censorship controversies surrounding 2 Live Crew and the NEA's defunding of performance artists John Fleck, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller also occurred during the summer of 1990. These debates concerned the content of art, not the beliefs of an artist expressed *outside* of her work.

However, within the country music network, a performer's image forms a central part of her reception, and radio airplay is vital for album sales. Don Gillmor of *Saturday Night* has written of k.d. lang's image: "She looked, depending on the night, like Stompin' Tom Connors or Buddy Holly on a cross-dressing spree; she didn't look like she would stand by her man. She bore no traces of country femininity, no signs of acquiescence prized by male listeners."²⁰ In 1989, Larry Nelson, owner of country music station WAUR in Aurora, Illinois, admitted that "a lot of country music fans are more conservative... They like a girl to look like a girl and a guy to look like a guy."²¹

Likewise, Warner Brothers's senior vice president of national country sales and promotion, Nick Hunter, acknowledged that "the image lang projects... intimidates people."²² As lang summarizes, "It's just the media's way of saying, 'God, is she gay?' without having to actually say the word."²³ Thus, while the animal rights issue functioned as a convenient excuse to ban lang from country radio, an implicit homophobic reaction to the perceived queerness of lang was also at work in the radio boycott, allowing country conservatives to push her even farther out of the country music circuit.

lang's music, too, was perceived as a threat to "traditional" country music tastes. Critics claimed that her style was disrespectful and mocked the "honesty" of country music.²⁴ lang herself admits her attitude toward recent trends in country music and justifies her own approach:

I think that there has been a continual phase in the urbanization of country music. It started with country-politan, which happens to be the music that I really like.

But in the development of country music, I think it went through a period of urbanization which closeted, or ignored, the real humor or twang of it. You know, the early, early stuff—the stuff that created rockabilly. They got embarrassed about it and it has never been able to come out of the closet totally. It became a parody of itself.²⁵

lang's use of the language of queer liberation to describe her view of urbanized country music is telling indeed and offers insight into the camp sensibility she employs in some of her tunes. For lang, to restore, or uncloset, the "real humor or twang" of country music is to engage with a camp musical strategy.

I return to Case's brief discussion of the aesthetics and practice of camp in which she concludes that the irony, wit, and artifice of camp work to reveal the constructedness of the conventions of straight sex and gender systems and liberate queers from the "regime of realist terror."²⁶ Although the irony and wit of k.d. lang's particular brand of camp is intended affectionately, it can be taken offensively by those country conservatives whose "regime of realist terror" camp means to dismantle.

In lang's cover of "Three Days" she camps up her performance and consequently invites a reading relevant particularly to women.

Three days that I dread to see arrive
 Three days that I hate to be alive
 Three days filled with tears and sorrow
 Yesterday, today, and tomorrow²⁷

“Three Days” moves in a regular sixteen-bar blues form and undergoes a half-step modulation before the repeat of verse two. The circular sixteen-bar form and the repetitions of each verse (with their internal repetitions of “three days”) underscore the bluesy sentiment of this tune, particularly as it is expressed in the last line: “these three days start over again.” As the song progresses, lang’s boisterous vocal inflections exceed the boundaries of the accompaniment. On one level, her performance conveys the “tears and sorrow” of missing the absent (or former) lover. She “cries” with her voice with increasing intensity throughout the tune. On another level, what starts out as an aural tribute to Patsy Cline is soon camped up: the frequency and exaggeration of her vocal cries, glides, whimpers, and hiccups in the final statement of each verse reinterpret the three days much more physically. The three days now suggest menstruation. lang’s campy vocal maneuvers re-present the “dread,” the “tears and sorrow,” and the knowledge that it will “start over again” to form a menstrual narrative, so to speak, and pokes fun at the cultural taboos surrounding menstruation. In so doing, she boldly parodies both the tune itself—its corny, clichéd formulas—and those who scorn camp in country music.

**star starvation:
lang thangs and “real dyke” politics**

Lesbians have been the rudest to me on the road... They think I owe them something. They want me to go out to a club with them, but I don’t like clubs, gay or straight. I’ve been to lesbian and gay conferences. I’ve worn a pink triangle. Where did it get me? I admire gay activists, but I’m an artist. (k.d. lang, 1992)²⁸

If the country music establishment resents k.d. lang for her androgynous image, antibeef politics, and “dishonest” music, the lesbian establishment has criticized her for not being out enough in her work. Although many lesbians are wildly enthusiastic fans (lang thangs), they have had to grapple—until only very recently—with lang’s refusal to come out as openly lesbian. To lesbians and queer-sensitive people who instantly recognize a lesbian sensibility and behavior, lang’s dykeness is obvious.²⁹ In her account of a k.d. lang show at Caesar’s Lake Tahoe (Nevada), lesbian critic Susie Bright writes: “She [lang] doesn’t make any admission to her adoring girl fans, but she certainly teases us to death... If only I was a mysterious talent who never said a word about her private life but fulfilled every dewy-eyed homosexual crush!”³⁰ An

On Our Backs reader responded to Bright’s article most unsympathetically:

I hate to be a sourpuss, but all this lesbian hero-worship of k.d. lang really irks me. Lesbian celebrities who stay firmly wedged in the closet are bad enough, but lesbian celebrities who tease and prance and flirt just barely on the wrong side of coming out make my blood boil!... They’re willing to soak up our love and money, but won’t take the risk of coming out.³¹

Similarly, a Santa Cruz reviewer who praises k.d. lang for “her bold defiance of the c.w. tradition” also felt that during her show lang unfairly “manipulated” and “teased” the lesbians in the audience.³² And Stacy D’Erasmus of the *Village Voice* bemoans lang’s semisecret identity: “What makes girls in the real world go crazy is lang’s self-consciousness, an awareness of the tropes she’s manipulating that suggests she could, at any minute, say the words we long to hear.”³³

Arlene Stein has discussed the problem of the varying degrees of outness among lesbians in popular music, including lang:

The arrival of the new breed of androgynous pop women [k.d. lang, Tracy Chapman, Michelle Shocked, Phranc, Indigo Girls], propelled in large part by an increasingly self-conscious lesbian audience, signals the fact that women can now defy conventions of femininity in popular music and still achieve mainstream success. But at what cost? Are “androgynous” women performers cowering to a homophobic industry, enacting a musical form of passing? Or are they pushing the limits of what is possible and, along with it, lesbian visibility?

A growing debate pits those who would stand outside the dominant culture and openly name their lesbianism (even if that naming restricts their audience) against those who, in search of broader appeal, represent their sexuality more covertly.

... For the new breed of women are not particularly heterosexually identified, and many are no less out than their women’s music predecessors [Alix Dobkin, Meg Christian, Cris Williamson]. Phranc and Two Nice Girls are the two most obvious examples, but much the same could be said for k.d. lang, probably the butchiest woman entertainer since Gladys Bentley (even if she’d rather support animal rights than say the “L-word”).³⁴

Obviously, at issue here is the need for positive, clear-cut lesbian representation in mainstream popular music. The visibility of lesbians in popular culture is so thoroughly minimized that when it does surface, it is often in hatefully negative terms, or it is enticingly suggested only to be firmly denied. It was not until 1985 that Donna Dietch’s film *Desert Hearts*, which enjoyed

mainstream circulation, presented portrayals of lesbians who finally remain lesbians (that is, they do not convert back to heterosexuality).³⁵ In other words, dykes are starved for representation in popular culture, particularly in music. lang satisfies this hunger to a significant, but limited, extent. The criticism levelled against her by other lesbians suggests that representation is not enough: lesbians seem to need the Perfect Star. As Lily Braindrop puts it:

While no artists are obligated to wear their sexuality on their sleeve, it's disheartening how few major-label queers buck the stigma and address their sexuality at all. We're all tired of songs with suspiciously gender-vague lyrics and pussyfooting interview quotes like "My focus is on my art, not on my sexuality," "I keep my personal life separate," and "Oh, I would never categorize my sexuality. Who cares about that stuff anyway?" You want to know who cares about "that stuff"? Millions of queers in this country who are aching to see a mainstream performer stand up and say "Yes, I am!"³⁶

And, of course, it really is not fair to insist that lang be the Perfect Star, but this need stems from the grim fact that lesbians are still a terribly oppressed minority. The ironic mechanisms of oppression work simultaneously to instill an intense desire for lesbian visibility while maintaining a need to vigorously criticize the very woman who is visibly and audibly lesbian.

I think k.d. lang has a much larger political project on her hands than most lang thangs acknowledge. Perhaps the expectation or promise to satisfy the social and political needs of her "adoring girl fans" was not even set up by lang. Rather, I perceive her as an artist who admirably attempts to bring the discourses of lesbianism and country music into some sort of mutually compatible coexistence, and it is country music that will have to shape up, not the lesbian nation.

postscript: from country to cuntry

It's taken me a long time to say yes to *The Advocate* because I know the repercussions are gonna be there. It's like, I want to be out. I want to be out! Man, if I didn't worry about my mother, I'd be the biggest parader in the whole world. (k.d. lang, 1992)³⁷

The public comings out of Debra Chasnoff, Sandra Bernhard, and k.d. lang certainly marked 1992 as an illustrious year for lesbians. Chasnoff, who won an Academy Award for her documentary *Deadly Deception: General Electric,*

Nuclear Weapons, and Our Environment, thanked her lover, Kim Klausner, during her nationally televised acceptance speech.³⁸ Bernhard, who had previously maintained a smug secrecy about naming her sexuality, loudly declared, "I'm out! I'm out!" during her show *Giving till It Hurts*, which toured North America in mid-1992. In early June, k.d. lang came out officially in an interview in one of the most celebrated issues of *The Advocate*.³⁹ On 10 August, she appeared as a guest on *Arsenio Hall* and spoke about her decision to come out in the *Advocate* interview. She seemed relieved to have come out and yet firmly concluded that she would rather that "people focus on my music, which is ultimately the most important to me." However, about her music and her lang thangs, she remarked in a Bay Area interview that "I'm a lesbian, but my music isn't lesbian music. They [lesbian fans] have to realize that's the way I feel, and respect it."⁴⁰

I think lang's obvious concern with *how* her audience interprets the connection(s) between her lesbianism and her music is perhaps not as crucial as the larger issue of confronting homophobia within the popular music industry. Perhaps lang's disclosure will make it a bit easier for other queers in mainstream popular music to come out, especially those who choose to come out before they have gained any success.⁴¹ The miracles that lesbians and gay men work by coming out every day, and in everyday places, must never be underestimated, but when celebrity types come out, our existence can be validated and celebrated beyond the queer subculture. k.d. lang's disclosure marks an important historical moment for women who seek and enjoy wide-ranging presentations of gender and female sexuality—especially lesbianism—in popular culture.



Notes

This essay owes its existence to Nancy Newman. I also want to thank Lydia Hamesley and Lynn Mickelson for their encouragement and enthusiasm, and my brother, Joe Mockus, for introducing me to k.d. lang's music.

1. "Lesley Gore on k.d. lang...and Vice Versa," *Ms.* (July/August 1990): 30.
2. Bill Malone, "Country Music, 1972–84" in *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968, revised 1985), 369–416.
3. Malone, 369.
4. Malone, 374–412.
5. B. Ruby Rich, "On Standing by Your Girl," *Artforum* 30 (Summer 1992): 19.
6. Steven Anderson, "The Power of Country Music," in Al Borcharding and George

- Holdgrafer, eds., *Pride Guide 1992* (Minneapolis: Twin Cities Lesbian-Gay Pride Committee and International Gay/Lesbian Archives, 1992): 82.
7. Interview with Dave Jennings, "The Twang's the Thang: k.d. lang," *Melody Maker* (26 May, 1990): 41.
 8. Jennings, "The Twang's the Thang," 41.
 9. Wynn Stewart (JAT Music Publishing Co., 1968), recorded on *Love's Gonna Happen to Me*, Capitol Records ST-2849.
 10. I am indebted to Jim Mannheim for sharing his recording of Stewart's "Make Big Love" with me.
 11. Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 282–99.
 12. Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," 291–92, 297. In the anthology *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), many of the essays—too numerous to cite here—discuss butch and femme not only as subversive role-playing, but as central features of lesbian gender and sexual identification.
 13. See Judith A. Peraino, "'Rip Her to Shreds': Women's Music According to a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," *repercussions* 1 (Spring 1992): 19–47.
 14. I might add that the butch-femme aesthetic in country music was probably first set in motion by Dolly Parton, whose self-consciously excessive femininity can be read as a humorous critique of gender stereotyping. Needless to say, Parton also enjoys a huge lesbian and gay audience.
 15. k.d. lang/Ben Mink (Bumstead Publishing/Zavion Music 1989) recorded on *Absolute Torch and Twang*, Sire Record 4–25877.
 16. As many critics of k.d. lang have noted, some of her butch mannerisms, vocal and visual, resemble those of Elvis Presley. This was especially apparent in her performance of "Jingle Bell Rock" on the 1988 Christmas special of *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, which, I must say, was one of the queerest of Pee Wee's episodes: Little Richard, Grace Jones, the DelRubio Triplets, Charo, Whoopi Goldberg, and Cher, among others, were all featured guests. For other particularly lesbian fascinations with Elvis, see Sue Wise, "Sexing Elvis," Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 390–98; and Phyllis Christopher, "Elvis Herselvis," *On Our Backs* 7 (July/August 1991): 23–27.
 17. Jennings, "The Twang's the Thang," 41.
 18. Jeffrey Abelson, "Industry Should Defend k.d. lang's Rights: Radio Boycott Sets Bad Precedent," *Billboard Magazine* 102 (18 August, 1990): 11.
 19. Abelson, "Industry Should Defend k.d. lang's Rights: Radio Boycott Sets Bad Precedent," 11.
 20. Don Gillmor, "The Reincarnation of Kathryn Dawn," *Saturday Night* 105 (June 1990): 30.
 21. Quoted in Katherine Seigenthaler, "Hot Singer, Cool Reception," *Chicago Tribune* (12 September, 1989), section 5: 2.
 22. Quoted in Sean Ross, "No Absolutes for Lyle & Lang: Country PDs Resist Grammy Winners," *Billboard* 102 (10 March 1990): 14.
 23. Quoted in Linda Kohanov, "k.d. lang," *Pulse!* (April 1992): 74.
 24. See the scathing review of *Absolute Torch and Twang* by Rich Kienzle in *Country Music* (Sept/Oct 1989): 59. In this review, Kienzle also vents his spleen over lang's previous album, *Shadowland*. He claims that "honesty is what country music has always been about, and in [lang's] case, I don't hear much" (emphasis mine). See also Ross, "No Absolutes for Lyle & Lang," 14; Tom De Savia, "k.d. lang's Truly Western Experience," *Cash Box Magazine* (10 June 1989): 7.
 25. De Savia, "k.d. lang's Truly Western Experience," 7.
 26. Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," 287–88.
 27. Willie Nelson and Faron Young, Pamper Publishing, 1962, Capitol Records 4696.
 28. Quoted in Adam Block, "k.d.: Lesbians Have Been the Rudest to Me," *The Advocate* 595 (28 January 1992): 66.
 29. Julia Sweeney's "Pat" on *Saturday Night Live* can be read in much the same way. Pat's wonderful insistence on not naming her gender or sexuality puzzles her (presumably) straight officemates, even though the lesbian subtext of Pat's behavior is quite apparent.
 30. Susie Bright, "Famous Lesbian Dilemmas," *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World* (Pittsburgh and San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1990), 148–49.
 31. Christina Winter, Letters, *On Our Backs* (March/April 1990): 5.
 32. Joan Edwards, "k.d. lang Blazing Trails," *Matrix Women's Newsmagazine* 13 (October 1989): 19.
 33. "Canadian Love Call," *Village Voice* 37 (2 June 1992): 78.
 34. Arlene Stein, "Androgyny Goes Pop: But Is It Lesbian Music?" *Out/Look* 12 (Spring 1991): 26–33.
 35. I find it very interesting that this film, the story of which takes place in Reno, Nevada, 1959, features the music of Patsy Cline. This complicates my earlier assertion that queerness and country music stand discursively opposed to one another.
 36. Lily Braindrop, "Pop Goes Queer," *The Advocate* 587 (8 October 1991): 37.
 37. Brendan Lemon, "Virgin Territory: k.d. lang," *The Advocate* 605 (16 June 1992), 44.
 38. For queer coverage of this event, see Robin Stevens, "Dykes' Night out at the Oscars," *Out/Look* 17 (Summer 1992): 31–34.
 39. Lemon, "Virgin Territory," 34–46. lang also discusses her tortured relationship with the country music industry as well as her recent musical style shift to "postnuclear cabaret" on her latest compact disc, *Ingénue*.
 40. Barry Walters, "k.d. lang: it's a little bit fun being oppressed," *San Francisco Examiner* (2 August 1992), D1.
 41. Currently thriving in North America is an active nonassimilationist queer music scene led by openly gay and lesbian performers and recording labels. See Braindrop, "Pop Goes Queer"; Adam Block, "Gary Floyd, Rockin' Bear"; Lily Braindrop and Adam Block, "Tribe 8 and Bay Area Acts"; Doug Sadownick and Stuart Timmons, "Drance and the Amoeba Artists"; Jim Fouratt and Victoria Starr, "The Best of the Big Apple"; Michael Bronski and Jim Provenzano, "Adult Children and a Foxx"; Adam Block, "Queer Music by Mail"; all in *The Advocate* 587 (8 October 1991): 37–44.