# PRISON AND POP

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## ABSTRACT

Purpose – *This chapter examines how prison spaces are depicted in fictional contexts built around icons of popular music. Given that both icons and inmates occupy spaces that the majority of the population does not observe or experience, I am interested in the degree to which prisons serve as stagings for queer expression, even when inhabited by mainstream music stars.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The lyrical content and visual texts of Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock," Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care About Us," Lady Gaga's "Telephone," as well as material from mainstream musicals like Chicago, are closely analyzed and linked to other scholarly work on prison narratives.*

Findings – *In addition to binding the power of pop iconicity to the experience of incarceration, the musical numbers and cultural artifacts examined here also reveal differing manifestations of queer motifs in their visual and lyrical construction. Mainstream representations of prisons' unique and liminal social orders are therefore considered to be open to queer renderings of affection and provocation.*

Originality/value – *Although prison sexuality is intensely studied by human rights organizations and criminologists, the possibilities for queer*

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*expression within fictional prison contexts have not been explicitly linked to the pop personas of music superstars and their creative projects.*

**Keywords:** Prison; stardom; popular music; Michael Jackson; Elvis Presley; Lady Gaga

## INTRODUCTION

Few places frighten and fascinate like the prison, the designated residence for those considered worthy of medium- to long-term separation from society. Modern systems of laws revolve in large part around the use of incarceration to both punish individuals for their infractions and prepare some of them for reintegration into society. The intended "correcting" of those who have deviated from mainstream rules involves a range of sanctioned practices, including drug abuse treatment, spiritual ministry, vocational training, athletic regimens, and guidance for post-release careers.

When prison scenes are depicted in music videos, films, or television, I suspect that reactions may be divided into at least two camps: the responses of those who have spent time in prison as inmates, visitors, or staff, and those who have not. Like the military or nightlife, unless one has had direct contact with these subcultures, it is difficult to fully make sense of their inimitable phenomenological textures. As of the writing of this chapter, I have visited a prison inmate in a maximum-security correctional facility in upstate New York eight times: the first three times in the prison's separate Special Housing Unit, the latter times in the General Population visiting area, filled with young children, girlfriends, parents, and pastors. Compared with the apprehension that attended my first visit, it is almost humorous to consider that my more recent visits to a grim building adorned in razor wire have become routinized. Like any form of social acclimation, one learns where to go and how to comport oneself, how to casually interact with staff members, or when to hold up your hand against the ultraviolet light to display the coded ink stamp given to visitors.

Popular culture's deployment of prison scenes reveals a unique tension between the marginality of incarceration and the mainstream terrains occupied by pop artifacts. Such representations in mainstream films have attracted substantial analysis from scholars (e.g., Alber, 2011; Ciasullo, 2008; Russo, 1987). My preoccupation here is with popular music, since most pop tracks deal with matters of romance, friendship, adventure, sex,

individuality, or melancholy, phenomenological environments that are accessible to virtually everyone. Prison visits, however, are not common experiences, much less incarceration itself. The lifespans of most individuals will not include what must be the utter agony of being confined to a small room from which you cannot voluntarily exit, caged alongside others who stand ready to rob or otherwise harm you, and watched over by armed officials thoroughly unsympathetic to your condition. As Michel Foucault, the great theorist and historian of the prison, writes, "Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness…" (2012, p. 9). Since prison constitutes a set of experiences unseen and poorly understood by mainstream populations, the contained set of social relations that prisons configure easily lend themselves to abstraction and romanticization.

This tension between isolated reality and external representation is this chapter's point of departure for an examination of the extent to which a prison may be seen as a *queer space*. To be clear, this is not a criminological study of contemporary prison sexuality. Rather, I am interested in how pop music stars' insertion of themselves into fabricated imprisonments enacts a modality of prison life that is open to queer identity-building both for themselves and for the viewer. As a sociologist interested in new cultural formations that are often based on new performances of gender, I am curious about what Alber (2011) examined as "prison metaphors," especially those that appear open to queer expressions of affection, protest, intimacy, and creativity.

The material to be examined consists of Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" (1957), Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care About Us" (1996), and Lady Gaga's "Telephone" (2010), as well as other relevant cultural objects. What makes these visual texts so compelling is precisely the fact that "The King of Rock and Roll," "The King of Pop," and a would-be "Queen of Pop" are reduced to uniform-wearing, numeral-inscribed inmates in spaces that afford a fantastical exploration of queer sensuality. The uniqueness of prison liminality is mirrored by the fact that fame is as much of a distinctive experience as prison life, albeit one much harder to achieve. The existence of the famous celebrity is usually upheld as rare, glamorous, and highly coveted, while the life of an inmate is accessible to anyone willing to incur the wrath of the law. What is curious, however, is that celebrities enduring their most woeful moments at times compare their lives to being imprisoned, to being jailed in a cage of glitter and gold. For them, the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault is occupied not by

watchful agents of the state but by omnipresent paparazzi, reporters, and fans. Given these divergences and congruences between fame and felony, the following analysis will use three mainstream music numbers as visual texts with which to explore how pop icons perform the prison experience for their audiences. Contexts in popular music, I will argue, create levels of aesthetic layering that emphasize the quality of prisons as queer spaces.

## PRISON AS CONTAINER AND INCUBATOR

In the social sciences, the great theorist of the prison and its place as a modern instrument of social configuration is of course Michel Foucault. His *Discipline and Punish* offers tremendous insight into prisons, their internal structures and protocols, and their relationship with prevailing social norms, while other writings and interviews expand on his core theses. Although a full engagement with Foucault's history of the prison is beyond the scope of this chapter, I focus on his interest in the relationship between the criminal's punishment and the broader social body. As Foucault argues, "It is the criminal, in fact, that is needed by the press and public opinion. It is he who will be hated, against whom all the passions will be directed, and for whom the penalty and oblivion will be demanded" (1994, p. 432). The prisoner thereby acquires a functional purpose: a subject is configured against which the animosities of a social order may be directed. As Foucault claims elsewhere, "At the end of the eighteenth century, people dreamed of a society without crime. And then the dream evaporated. Crime was too useful for them to dream of anything as crazy – or ultimately as dangerous – as a society without crime. No crime means no police. What makes the presence of and control of the police tolerable for the population, if not fear of the criminal? This institution of the police, which is so recent and oppressive, is only justified by that fear" (1980, p. 47). Such socially useful roles have been famously depicted in literature, for example, the consequences of moral, religious, and political deviance in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and George Orwell's *1984*, respectively.

The inverse of such an odious social position is occupied by the great cultural icons whose fame serves as a font that invests significance and inspiration in the lives of the masses. Posters of long dead individuals like Marilyn Monroe, Andy Warhol, James Dean, and Audrey Hepburn still populate storefronts, newsstands, and advertisements, perpetuating their

iconicity beyond their mortality. As noted by Herwitz (2008), "Rather than acknowledge that suffering is waste, emptiness, lack of meaning, the cult turns to the suffering of the star icon, makes her aura into something transcendent, identifies with that transcendence, and thus practices a view of the world in which reconciliation with suffering becomes imaginable through her, in which the initiates' own suffering becomes mysteriously elevated" (p. 28). If collective hatred is piled onto the condemned prisoner who makes social life dangerous, curiosity and adulation uplift the revered icon that makes existence glisten.

The repeated representations of prison settings in popular culture mean that a certain lore has arisen involving inmates' social order, sexual norms, and the corruption of prison administrators. And the insertion of these contexts into mainstream television is almost inevitable. It is virtually de rigeur for a sitcom to include a jailhouse episode so as to derive comedic fodder from the spectacle of thrusting the shows' protagonists into a fetid jail cell populated by prostitutes or petty thieves. Hit comedies ranging from *The Golden Girls* to *Everybody Loves Raymond* feature episodes where the main characters somehow find themselves in their local jail. The accompanying innuendo around same-sex romance is inevitable. The storylines of other shows like *Orange Is the New Black, Arrested Development, Oz*, and *Prison Break* revolve around movement into and out of prisons, to say nothing of the many reality television shows depicting the lives of inmates, corrections officers, and parolees. But what is the purpose, then, of depicting culture's most admired and applauded pop music stars in the role of inmate? Although attention-grabbing and shock value certainly feeds into the desirability of such spectacle, I will claim that pop's penetration of such a realm of deviance is predicated on the prison's aesthetic power as a fluid and shifting queer space, less constrained by mainstream norms and thereby providing endless fodder for fantastical representations of "deviant" sensualities.

## TIME TO RUMINATE: PRISON AS IDENTITY BUILDER

A casual look at television commercials, billboards, or mass transit ads demonstrates that the summer cinema season is now driven largely by films based on superhero franchises from the two primary comic publishers, DC and Marvel. Sequels, prequels, and reboots featuring the latest in computer-generated imaging explore tales of good and evil originating from

characters and storylines developed as far back as the 1930s. Among the most successful of these franchises has been Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)), which aspired to lend a more modern, realistic air to DC's noir detective mythos. Much of Nolan's "legend" revolves around the narrative locus of a prison. We see prisons as contemplative spaces, murky arenas from which new identities can emerge, whether heroic or villainous. The isolation of incarceration and its life-altering quality afford an opportunity for introspective evaluations of past decisions, present circumstances, and prospects for the future. Some prison contemplations yield results that have cast long shadows over political history, for example, Adolf Hitler's authoring of *Mein Kampf* in Landsberg Prison in 1924 or Evita Perón's visits to her imprisoned husband Juan in 1945 before the initiation of his dictatorship. Of course, some prisoners complete their sentences with a strong commitment to a lawful lifestyle while others become repeat offenders who do not radically alter their behavior following their release.

Before turning to my cases, I want to briefly examine how the prison serves as a contemplative space in the wildly popular Nolan trilogy. In the first film of the series, Bruce Wayne leaves behind an affluent life in Gotham after his wealthy parents are murdered and seeks out criminals in order to understand the pathology that feeds his home city's decay. While in Bhutan, "the prince of Gotham" is jailed and visited in his cell by his would-be mentor and eventual nemesis. From this initial encounter in his cell Wayne is recruited into a secret society from which he would later adapt his own vigilante persona. Wayne returns to Gotham with the intent to fight the mob via his new Batman identity.

In the film's sequel, Gotham's mob bosses retaliate by allying with a maniacal terrorist known as the Joker. After an extravagantly explosive sequence that culminates in the Joker's arrest, the subsequent scenes of his jailing and interrogation at the police headquarters' holding cell are arguably the most dramatic, jarring, and expository of all the character's scenes. Caging the villain affords an opportunity to contemplate his twisted pathology as well as a narrative space within the film for him to articulate a nihilistic, anti-social ethos and enact his iconic antagonism with the Batman.

It is, however, in the trilogy's final film that the prison assumes a central place in the mythos. Bane, the film's main villain, acquires his thoroughly brutal fighting prowess and fierce devotion to destruction in an Escher-like foreign prison known as the "worst hell on earth," where Bane claims to have "learned the truth about despair." After a vicious fight, Bane brings a

nearly broken Batman back to the prison, which he comes to control years after escaping. During the hero's imprisoned convalescence and ruminations over how to escape, Bane blasts open Gotham's main prison, which Bane claims is a symbol of the city's irreparable corruption. The Dark Knight eventually finds the inspiration with which to "rise" out of the prison pit. As this brief sketch hopefully makes clear, the prison as a container and incubator is an indispensable narrative motor for Nolan's trilogy. With so much time to ruminate, some prisoners begin legendary heroic journeys, others prepare for murderous rampages, and others expose their utter psychosis.

## THE KING, NUMBER 47, AND NUMBER 3

The 1957 film *Jailhouse Rock* traces the rise of construction worker-cum-convict Vince Everett played by "The King," Elvis Presley. Everett acquires musical training while serving a prison sentence that he later develops successfully into a career as a recording artist. From the perspective of the sociology of fame, the film illustrates constants in how a celebrity persona is produced that existed in the 1950s and persist even today, for example, cajoling DJs into playing a song or negotiating personal relationships in business contexts. Presley's character must manage his obligations to past compatriots and sift through his own feelings toward his gorgeous business manager.

Other conflicts for the nascent superstar are peculiar to the time period, for example, navigating the transition from gaining airplay on the radio to developing a televisual presence. (The novelty of the TV terrain for recording artists was perhaps analogous to the rise of YouTube and social media today.) Everett sings the film's title track when NBC organizes a "nationwide television extravaganza" and invites him to participate in the broadcast. The number is staged in a stylized and austere cellblock setting with Everett and the other prisoners wearing identical black-and-white stripe shirts underneath black jackets. During the number, dancing to the jailhouse rock song involves twirling around a firepole, sliding down a long cafeteria table, and culminates with even the prison guards joining in as they merrily spin their batons.

Although the performance is fairly straightforward and mundane, some of the lyrics raised eyebrows for the same-sex prison relationship that they cheekily evoke. Presley sings about two inmates that he identifies by their

prison numbers, 47 and 3. The first addresses the other as "the cutest jailbird" ever seen. The prisoner initiating the exchange says that he would be "delighted" with the other's company and invites him to join in the Jailhouse Rock. Given the thoroughly masculine quality of most Presley films and his overall persona, the insertion of a romantically suggestive comment among male inmates, even sung in the third person, is unusual. If it was merely innocuous banter one could imagine Presley employing the first person, but this scenario is largely unthinkable. More importantly, as soon as the verses are sung we see an inmate playfully touch another inmate's face and exchange a caress of hands, followed by joyful dancing alongside Presley.

It is interesting that even in a black-and-white 1957 film the liminal place of the prison affords some space, however brief and constrained, of queer suggestion. Despite the insinuation of same-sex flirtation among inmates, including an invitation to dance and share "company," the intensely masculine reading of the scene and the film in general is not jeopardized by the lyrics. In fact, during a concert aired on CBS in December 2007 called "Movies Rock," recording artist Chris Brown, who attracted vigorous public outrage for his battery of then girlfriend Rihanna, sang the complete "Jailhouse Rock," even pointing to a male backup dancer as he sang the "cutest jailbird" portion.

The lack of access to heterosexual intimacy in prisons and the violently maintained status hierarchies have long been held as viable explanations for male inmates' indulgence of same-sex relations while incarcerated. While the prison social context could afford an opportunity to explore sexual preferences unavailable to them outside prison walls, sex among inmates is more often rape by prisoners seeking to fulfill libidinal desire as well as assert their dominance. As watchdog groups have documented, for example, Human Rights Watch (2001), although violent rape is often at the heart of prison sexual relations, more subtle forms of coercion can also compel sex among inmates. Access to material goods and contraband may be exchanged for sexual acts. According to Human Rights Watch, "…an inmate hierarchy exists by which certain prisoners enjoy a great deal of power over their fellows and other prisoners are exposed to exploitation and abuse" (2001). The implications of the "Jailhouse Rock" flirtation are therefore potentially deviant in a double sense: the initiation of a queer romance that defies the hegemonic masculinity of the King's iconicity as well as a potentially coercive interaction among inmates of unequal status.

Other films like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), based on a Stephen King novella, also take on the issue of sexual abuse in prisons. *Shawshank*

features a group of male prisoners known as the "Sisters" who repeatedly and violently rape the story's protagonist (see Alber, 2011). Curiously, the film limits deviance from sexual norms to a band of aggressive rogues while largely leaving the main protagonists (played by Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman) in the sanitized realm of friendly reminiscences, playful heterosexual banter, and personal art projects.

But abuse and homosexual relations are not relegated to Hollywood depictions of male prisons. Ciasullo (2008) offers a rich examination of female inmates' depiction in film. She observes certain constants. For example, "Whereas the straight female protagonist is almost always released from prison, the 'true' lesbian almost always remains – or dies – in prison" (Ciasullo, 2008, p. 205). The 1950 film *Caged* examines the arrival of a young woman in prison who clashes with a domineering butch matron. The image of the masculinized woman presiding over blocks of female prisoners is itself an interesting cultural figure, but other scenes among inmates make clear the extent to which sexual deviance accompanies punishment for unlawful deviance outside of prison. As a much older female inmate advises the newly jailed young woman, "If you stay in here too long you don't think of guys at all. You just get out of the habit." The implications of her remark are stark. The prison is effectively *too much* of a liminal space, such that heterosexual attraction may be elided from a woman's identity over time.

Consider a more lighthearted case in the 2002 film *Chicago* (based on the musical of the same name by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse), particularly Matron Mama Morton, the so-called "Mistress of Murderers' Row" at Cook County Jail. Her musical number "When You're Good to Mama" is a rather sardonic declaration of the ineluctable law of quid pro quo that characterizes prison life and the informal status hierarchy to which I alluded earlier. The song celebrates what Morton refers to as "reciprocity," an institutional social order in which she manages the traffic of contraband and press access in exchange for payments and favors. Her song suggests that when a basket for contributions is passed around, one should contribute, given that one "putting in" for Morton will mean that she will, in turn, "put out" for them. The double entendre evokes both sexual availability as well as procurement of prison contraband. Given that her colleagues and wards are all females, the queer nature of her power stands in relief. Also, the character is played by Queen Latifah, who has herself been the subject of tabloid speculation about lesbian relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mama Morton falls in line with the imagery of the masculinized, cunning matron seen in *Caged*. When Morton first meets the

film's blonde protagonist, she remarks, "Ain't you the pretty one?" as she caresses her flaxen hair. While leading the new arrival to her cell, Morton is seen distributing contraband, casually slapping the thighs of the female inmates she oversees.

## THE KING OF POP CARES ABOUT US

In addition to prisons offering a space for individual contemplation of personal ambitions and failings, I also argue that they can be spaces for an articulation of queer reactions to and provocations of broader social currents. To pursue this line of inquiry, consider Michael Jackson's 1996 album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, which included the controversial "They Don't Care About Us" track that yielded two videos directed by another controversy magnet, Spike Lee. The first video was set in a Brazilian favela with Jackson surrounded by an energetic drum corps and festive local children. The colorful imagery was largely celebratory and meant to tidily fit into Jackson's image as a globetrotting humanitarian at ease with impoverished Third World communities. A second video took on a darker and more strident flavor by placing Jackson in two prison spaces: behind bars in his own cell and in the prison cafeteria amid what appears to be an incipient riot. It is a peculiar context to be inhabited by the "King of Pop," who at times seemed so ensnared by his fame, the demands of his family, and the ambiguities of his racial and gender identities (see Nyong'o, 2011).

The video begins with African-American children in a playground singing behind a chain-link fence, which simulates a kind of urban caging. The video then moves to the prison setting, beginning with a cafeteria filled with prisoners in blue uniforms angrily pounding tables. The viewer then peers into a cell holding Jackson, also dressed in blue prison overalls. Multiple monitors that appear to have burst through the walls flash images of the Rodney King beating, the Tiananmen Square massacre, Klu Klux Klan rallies, and violent protests, all images that have become seared into the public consciousness as symbols of division and conflict. The projections and Jackson's performances are clearly intended to augment a sensation of rage and frustration at an unjust status quo. Using special effects, the video culminates with Jackson's frenzied dances within the panorama of violent projections, literally interweaving himself into the narrative of social pain.

It is important to note how the placement of the track's sung set of statements about social justice amidst incarcerated convicts binds political

protest to the country's incarcerated population. Although groups like Human Rights Watch have documented abuse in the so-called "prison-industrial complex," one simply cannot presume that the majority of inmates have been sentenced unjustly. The durability of Jackson's visual association of resistance to the Klan or Chinese Communism with the prison population is neither straightforward nor readily convincing. The video itself appears to be reluctant to fully commit to this interpolation. The inmates' pounding and yelling in the cafeteria never reaches the crescendo of an actual riot. Instead, the video ends as so many of Jackson's appearances finished: with vigorous applause. The fact that the wild gesticulations of Jackson's pale and thin frame are being cheered by a tightly-packed room of muscular male inmates lends the video a curiously queer flavor, particularly given tabloid speculation about Jackson's own sexuality. The video's last image takes yet another visual leap away from the entire locus of the video by finishing with an image from the first "They Don't Care About Us" video: Jackson running up the stairs of a favela.

The track attracted controversy for lyrics construed by some to be anti-Semitic. Jackson responded to the press by claiming, "I am the voice of everyone. I am the skinhead, I am the Jew, I am the black man, I am the white man. I am not the one who was attacking. It is about the injustices to young people and how the system can wrongfully accuse them" (Weinraub, 1995). Of course, it is impossible to know the full extent of Jackson's intentions when writing the song although he did spend much of his career augmenting his role as the "King of Pop" with various humanitarian gestures, perhaps most infamously via his Neverland Ranch in California. Therefore, the desire to inhabit such disparate identities could be read as the hubris of a self-designated savior. Alternatively, it is the plea of a man whose uncertain and clashing identities facilitate a queer will to be everything and nothing all at once.

Other lyrics are also interesting in terms of symbolic postures. Jackson appeals to two left-of-center political icons: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The MLK appeal makes sense given the racial aspect of the incarceration debate, but to cry out to President Roosevelt seems somewhat tenuous with regard to lyrical and visual composition.

It is also useful to note that the *HIStory* album was released two years after child molestation accusations were leveled against Jackson. Accusations of intimacy with young boys fed rumors about his sexuality that even pulled in his dancing, mannerisms, and voice as "evidence" of homosexuality. Jackson's potentially queer identity was read as strange and unlawful, hence "Wacko Jacko." The album was a clear attempt to

recuperate the King of Pop's diminished stardom. From this perspective it is not surprising that the prison video for "They Don't Care About Us" (and some elements of the favela video) is intended to be contemplative, political, and polemic. Whether or not the denunciatory quality of the montage was intended to distract from Jackson's embarrassing litigation, it is clear that his exploration of this semiotic and political terrain is not straightforward, especially given Jackson's ambiguous identities as related to his gender, race, and age. It is nonetheless interesting and important to observe that Jackson and his artistic advisors chose prison settings as the visual context for his contemplation of injustice. It is even more remarkable that even the space in which he challenges some of the most grievous human rights abuses of the twentieth century culminates in his veneration by a mob-cum-audience.

## CALLING A NEW QUEEN

During the time that I prepared this chapter, television channels and YouTube regularly aired an advertisement for Boost Mobile in which the multiyear contracts that still dominate cellular telephony were equated with incarceration. A woman is led past panoramas of everyday people who unfortunately find themselves behind bars due to their contracts with phone companies. She begrudgingly signs a "Wireless Contract" and is then jailed. The commercial ends with her apparent tweet: "Cell contracts are lame… I'm on lockdown for a couple years!!!" Cell phones thereby imply prison cells. The absence of the market imperative in which a consumer can freely switch among brands is rendered comparable to long-term incarceration. This is one small example, I believe, of the extent to which prisons repeatedly attract commercial attempts to adopt and adapt its bleak and largely hidden spaces.

As I have discussed, prisons necessarily constrain the availability of heterosexual intimacy, while an informal status hierarchy emerges among inmates according to racial identity, gang affiliation, and sexual domination. This is not to suggest that genuinely strong and affective ties cannot be developed among queer friends and intimate partners, although it is important to note that the nature and variety of prison sexuality, of course, is far too complex to examine properly here. Instead, I wish to further examine the affordances of the prison as a queer space in popular culture via Lady Gaga's "Telephone" (2010) music video. As my discussion of

Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" and Michael Jackson's polemical prison video for "They Don't Care About Us" indicates, prisons may be spaces that permit queer suggestiveness. As I will claim, answering the call of Gaga's "Telephone" demonstrates the possibilities of new assemblies of queer bodies by a fresh generation of pop icons in the digital age of dense interconnectedness.

I have devoted a significant portion of my teaching and writing to the body of work developed by Lady Gaga since her 2009 album *The Fame Monster* album consolidated her ascendancy into the pop music firmament (Corona, 2011). Her video for the "Bad Romance" single retains its position as one of the most watched YouTube videos with nearly 530,000,000 views as of this writing. Her second *Fame Monster* single "Telephone" further solidified her position as a recording artist whose ambition appeared to go beyond the usual simplistic bubblegum formulae of pop princesses. Since then, several researchers have attempted to more closely examine the nature of her creativity and career, including Deflem (2012, 2013), Gray (2012), and Halberstam (2012).

Gaga's "Telephone" video, which was directed by Jonas Åkerlund and also featured Beyoncé, amounted to a short film at over nine minutes. Perhaps her most Warholian aesthetic statement to date, the video continued the narrative initiated in her 2009 "Paparazzi" video in which a young starlet poisons her abusive boyfriend and confesses to his murder. As a consequence of her crime, the "Telephone" video shows Gaga being escorted to her cell in a "Prison for Bitches" comprised of "gender deviants and unruly women" (Horn, 2012, p. 100), given that even the prison guards are transgender. The music video is appropriate for my discussion given that it is "not a comment on actual prisons so much as on the prison of representation itself and the formulaic sign systems we use to represent otherness" (Halberstam, 2012, p. 62).

Of course, the humorous conceit of the video is that the song's actual lyrics recount the experience of being unable to hear someone on the telephone while at a club but what the viewer actually *sees* consists of prison recreation and leisure time, exit from incarceration, a desert road trip, and mass murder. As Switaj mentions, the video "includes discord between the body that the lyrics indicate and that which the visual information indicates. She starts out with the stigmatized and abused body of a prisoner, stripped by guards who want to confirm her biological sex…" (Switaj, 2012, p. 46). After being stripped by the butch prison guards, the blurred image of Gaga's exposed crotch appears in a visually aggressive effort to end tabloid speculation that she was a hermaphrodite. She later ventures

into the prison yard, where she shares a passionate kiss with a masculine, leather-clad female inmate, all while Gaga's body is wrapped by chains that recall the mirror of Venus. She eventually leaves prison accompanied by Beyoncé, whom she affectionately calls "Honey B" in a set of scenes that evoke the Thelma and Louise partnership often claimed as part of queer cinema. Gaga and Honey B go on to commit mass murder by poisoning the patrons of a roadside diner, becoming a kind of queer killer duo in the lineage of Valerie Solanas (Halberstam, 2012), Aileen Wuornos, or even Leopold and Loeb (Schildcrout, 2011).

Various scholars have noted the degree to which "Telephone" represents a visually and sonically rich statement of Gaga's queer, hypermodern provocations. Halberstam, for example, observes that Gaga "manages to harness her ring tones to much deeper concepts, like the fragmentation of connection in the age of cell phones, the creation of new forms of rebellion in a universe of media manipulation, and the emergence of new forms of gender and sexuality in a digital age" (Halberstam, 2012, p. 63). Others point to a harmonious depiction of queer identities. Horn notes that the video's women are "represented in all shapes and sizes and several constellations of power, antagonism, friendship and desire without being devaluated or played off against each other. Rather than using the wardens' nonconforming bodybuilder-physique to divert from Lady Gaga's own rumored sex deviation, the video stresses the connection between these different kinds of women as gender outlaws" (Horn, 2012, p. 97). This is not to say that viewers perceive the depiction and rhythm of queer affect and sensuality in "Telephone" as being devoid of collision with other sets of identities. As Gray-Rosendale, Capaldo, Craig, and Davalos (2012) argue, "The prison scenes also seek to represent an 'authentic' tough, urban, street image," thereby romanticizing a lifestyle that is certainly fraught with violent encounters, as the video demonstrates (p. 229).

Gray-Rosendale et al. also make an argument that is relevant to my Presley and Jackson cases. They claim, "By 'playing' prison inmate and imitating what she understands to be prison behavior, Lady Gaga assumes that she has unlimited access to spaces, or to represent spaces un-commonly held by upper-class white women" (2012, p. 229). Horn's conclusion may be used and adapted as a reaction to Gray-Rosendale, et al.'s critique. But while I wholeheartedly agree with Horn's approval of a powerful and new "constellation of gender outlaws" in the Prison for Bitches, this alone is insufficient to counter Gray-Rosendale et al.'s argument, which essentially claims that "Telephone" appropriates a space to which Gaga should not necessarily have access. While they believe that Gaga's class and race

positions may perceivably impede her inhabiting of the prison persona, her own past relationships with women and her avid associations with queer communities mean that she has just as much of an aesthetic claim on the prison space as a white Southern male like Elvis Presley and an African-American male like Michael Jackson. In other words, two of Gaga's "constellations" matter greatly and are at the heart of the video's queering of prison space: the one internal to the video consisting of queer guards and inmates – and, I might add, the pop paraphernalia that adorns the video imagery – and, second, the "constellation" external to the video consisting of her collaborators and queer fan communities.

## PAROLE

This chapter has taken as its focus certain representations of prisons by pop music. Operating as same-sex spaces purposefully hidden from mainstream populations, prisons adopt a certain mystique in contemporary culture that I have argued is fundamentally queer in its enactment of gender. Affective and intimate practices that would be vigorously policed as sexual deviances in everyday social life become innocuous. Cases abound in television sitcoms, blockbuster movies, and elsewhere although I have chosen to focus on popular music. In her consideration of comparable representations in cinema, Ciasullo (2008) concludes that the set of cinematic representations of prison lesbianism that she masterfully examines actually "encloses the 'true' lesbian behind prison walls, establishes the limits of desire, and above all, restores the (heterosexual) order" (p. 218). I am more optimistic than Ciasullo. When pop icons whose posters adorn fan walls (and, today, fan screens) playfully and creatively occupy prison spaces with queer expression, the 'limits of desire' may be slowly chipped away at, just as the protagonist of *The Shawshank Redemption* steadily chiseled his way out of confinement over the course of several years.

Queer deviations from mainstream norms are naturalized in the space of the prison. Given that it is a liminal and contemplative space, criminals and celebrities alike are given license to disturb the boundaries of gender performance. To be sure, motivations vary. A felon facing a long sentence will have to make certain decisions about her or his sexual desire as well as be confronted with violent situations threatening sexual aggression. A pop star, by contrast, is operating in the domain of theatricality, although Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley did face arrest (Gaga only simulated a

mug shot at the end of "Paparazzi"). The relationship between pop and prison is nonetheless important, however, given that they are spaces into which few enter.

It is likely that fascination with prisons will not diminish whatsoever, to say nothing of curiosity about the endless legal scandals that seem to befall celebrities like Lance Armstrong, Amanda Bynes, Lindsay Lohan, Charlie Sheen, O. J. Simpson, and Reese Witherspoon. The image of the crestfallen celebrity in prison overalls will continue to compel public attention. Pop stars' own fascination with cultural representations of crime and its penal consequences will continue alongside the exploratory, rebellious dynamics of queer expression in all modes of cultural production. The depiction of these queer motifs does not need to be explicit or obvious. Like wild animals that use natural camouflage to survive and propagate, queer expressions in fictional prison spaces may at times masquerade behind the façade of hypermasculinity or humanitarianism or classic Americana. In October 2013, Lady Gaga is set to make her film debut in a crime/outlaw thriller called *Machete Kills*; her character's name is La Chameleón.

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