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Introduction

Y'all! the diva and us

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Definitions and delineations

The figure of the singer diva became prominent in the wider Western cultural landscape in the late 1990s – as effecting an entry into the mainstream, and then positioned as central to, or indeed the zenith of and, in turn, transformative to, pop cultures. The *VH1 Divas* series was a particular marker in this, and the first divas concert, on 14 April 1998, curated a line-up that mixed long-established divas (Aretha Franklin, Carole King) with the relatively recently established (Gloria Estefan, Mariah Carey). The setting was plush: orchestra and conductor, choreographed entrances and award ceremony-like lighting, as if working to dispel lingering prejudices in respect to Black culture (explored in this book in relation to the ‘hood’ by Nicole Hodges Persley, and the ‘welfare queen’ by Gwynne George). And such a *mise-en-scène*, which can be considered with respect to a neoliberal framing of music and stardom (which invariably showcased wealth) is diametrically opposite to Black music events of the previous generation, such as the Los Angeles ‘Black Woodstock’ – Wattstax of 1972, organized by Stax Records – which arose from, and reflected, its context of mass poverty, disenfranchisement and (literal) ashes:

‘Charcoal Alley’ – 103rd Street, seven miles south of the [LA Memorial] Coliseum, remained in ashes, and some of the main streets around the stadium, especially Vermont Avenue and Broadway, also still had deep scars at sites that had been torched in August 1965 [during the Watts Riots].

So the first requirement of the Wattstax festival was that the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] wouldn't be allowed inside the Coliseum . . . and that the security force inside had to be all Black – and unarmed.

(Davis and Wiener 2020: 625)

The appearance of Isaac Hayes for the Wattstax finale, striding on stage to the 'Theme from *Shaft*' (1971) – becaped, his bare chest bound in gold chains, and sporting tight orange trousers, shades and a shaven head, while asking/singing 'who's the Black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks?' – could be said to anticipate a post-Wattstax, post-1968 capitalist strategy for Black popular music, with a trajectory through Motown's 'Black Capitalism' phase, elements of the commercial phase of disco, aspirational content for MTV music videos, the materialist turn in rap, and then on to VH1's divas.¹ Hayes was introduced by Jesse Jackson, signalling a new Black power, and its alliances, for the 1970s – just as *VH1 Divas*, in its duets and collaborations, signalled alliances and potentials for the coming 2000s. Wattstax Black power for the 1970s (via Hayes and Jackson) can be read in political, community, creative and even sexual terms. Black power for the millennium (via, say, Carey duetting with Aretha Franklin) prompts different sets of readings – the task of those who have contributed to this book.²

Likewise, the 2000 *VH1 Divas* event, a tribute to Diana Ross, took in music from both the Supremes and Ross herself, and Donna Summer, Destiny's Child and RuPaul. In this, a renewal or renaissance of the diva figure seemed to be occurring, with contemporary hip-hop and pop positioned as in a direct continuum with (and so gaining something of the respectability and traction of) soul, rhythm and blues, and even 1970s women singer-songwriters. This occurred at the point of 'a radical reshaping of the landscape of popular music', away from buying and owning physical media and towards the live experience: 'the meeting of a demand for the actual presence of the global superstar in the global suburbs' (Edgar et al. 2015: 1).

Writing in 2001, Linda Lister sought to delineate three types of divas: Prima Divas (related back to the operatic prima donna: those with exceptional vocal abilities, with Barbra Streisand as an exemplar); late-twentieth-century innovators (with Madonna as exemplar); and a third category identified with 'the singer/songwriter/artist' (with the Lilith Fair Festival as exemplar, and hence 'Liliths') (2001: 2, 7). Lister concludes that a process of 'divafication' – enacted by both star and 'dutifully lip-synch[ing]' fans (8) – had effectively

removed the negative connotations formerly associated with the word ‘diva,’ thus diminishing the lexicon of misogynistic terminology. In retrospect, and with the diva considered as particular to hip-hop, divafication has since taken on something not so apparent in this earlier consideration: the patina of the fabulous, the notion of the event and the idea (explored extensively in the chapters of this book) of cultural resistance. That is: the diva themselves had arrived, in person – electrifying, glamourizing and possessed of an attitude. An indicator of the substantial cultural significance of this phenomenon, with respect to its potential or emergent politics, is apparent in bell hooks’s measured but incendiary words when she referred to prima diva Beyoncé as a ‘terrorist’ and ‘slave’ (‘especially in terms of the impact on young girls’; cited in Gay 2014) – and indeed the condemnatory response from Cooper in respect to hooks’s ‘antifeminist’ intervention into ‘the momentous generational shifts of this moment’ (2017: 234). That shift had occurred in a way that was outside the oppositional political imaginings of the 1960s and 1970s: glamour, which was then considered as the hubris or delusions of a decaying establishment, had now been reconceptualized as a matter of individual empowerment, and self-determination. This is recognized in the appropriation or reworking of diva and diva performative/behavioural tropes (which our contributors identify as ‘divadoms’) in trans cultures. The diva brought or renewed exceptional senses of superstardom, of glamour, of occasion, of live performance, of being fabulous, of emotional empathy and of a toughness born of struggle – that is, after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, and on to the goals of individual empowerment associated with third wave feminism: of being able, and more than willing, to answer back.³ That toughness seems proactive and, as per the activism that is read as typifying fourth wave feminism (see Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017), utilizes social media to call-out behaviours, and then not blanching from delivering those kinds of full-blooded criticisms in person too, as the opportunity arises (and with this appetite for confrontation identified as the *modus operandi*, even of the very young; see Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2016). Such proactive toughness, and desire to assert a position, aligns with the concept of ‘fierceness’ – something often attributed to divas. And we see a parallel of this fierceness in work on the idea of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017): fourth wave feminists, with a renewed sense of a collective sisterhood (something that had given way to the individualism of third wave feminism), are more than willing to stop the party in order to call attention to micro-aggressions, structural oppressions and gaslighting.

Indeed, the 2008 Beyoncé album *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce*, named after the then-stage persona of the singer, included two singles that were notable in their conception of fierceness. For ‘If I Were A Boy’ (2008), the singer imagines relationship difficulties from the privileged male perspective – a role switch that both highlights power dynamic disparities between genders, in a righteous, outspoken way, and recalls the mid-1990s third wave feminism (or postfeminism) moment in which some women were understood to unapologetically adopt male behavioural traits (as with British ‘ladettes’ – see Whiteley 2010). And, for ‘Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)’ (2008), the singer celebrates a new-found freedom, post-relationship split, while chastizing her ex-partner, who is seemingly stung by witnessing this exercise of this new-found freedom, for their failure to commit to the relationship when they had the chance. In this respect, a fierce embrace of a regained and fierce autonomy is both empowerment and progress, revenge and a moral or ethical lesson for those left in its wake.⁴ Fierceness, then, seems to hold the potential to catch the unreconstructed in the cross-fire: those who have not aligned themselves with the programme (of contemporary feminist-informed emancipation) have seemingly been left behind for good – ditched as part of the problem rather than part of a solution. Fierceness does not seem to be anger which, as per punk and post-punk, had its place and efficacy in popular music – albeit, as Springer argues, not necessarily for people of colour, whose anger has been historically read in different ways (2007). Rather, fierceness seems to be an absolute certainty and self-belief, along with a hair-trigger rapidity in dismissing those who do not support such hard-earned emancipation.

Many of the chapters in this volume track just such skirmishes, and note the ways in which divas continually (thrillingly, disappointingly, bafflingly) wrongfoot expectations, and in doing so come into their own. Consequently, the very definition, and then use, of the term ‘diva’ remains tantalizingly unsettled (and so we have been happy to present differing definitions from our authors). Even the diva status seems ontologically ambiguous. Peter Howe, in his writing on the work and experiences of paparazzi (2005), identifies three case study divas (Elizabeth Taylor, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and Princess Diana) as figures who ‘transcended their roles to radiate an irresistible allure’ (2005: 106). But that allure requires the boost of media construction:

Ask any photographer who shot them, and [*sic*] he’ll tell you that photographing them was a two-way affair: they may have reacted at times with anger and

frustration at the constant attention, but they all flirted with the camera and understood its power.

(2005: 106)

Such a dynamic is familiar from Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) – a foundational text to an understanding of the links between post-war urban regeneration and the rise of a new celebrity or media class, complete with the aspirational idea which Catherine Hakim would define as 'erotic capital' (2011) for the secular age. The diva herself (played by Anita Ekberg) is first cast as a visiting Goddess, then the centre of a press scrum, then courted by journalists and pursued by paparazzi for unending photoshoots, then subject to strategies of seduction by others – and finally seen to be subject to an unhappy marriage and domestic violence and, arguably and consequently, suffering from mental instability. Ekberg's Sylvia seems blessed by God (or cursed by the devil) to simply be born to be a diva, dragging the hordes and their cameras in her wake. Andy Warhol's superstars, in a comparable way, seemed to arise across the confusing or contradictory matrices of both happenstance (the everyday-ness of his stars) and the possession of some kind of one-in-a-million ineffable X-factor, that fuels Howe's allure. The case of Edie Sedgwick is particularly telling in this respect: someone who seemed to drift into the Warhol environs, only to be placed before the camera with little to no direction – other than to be herself – and is enhanced by the osmosis that occurs within a company of stars. In this respect, the superstar, as with Edie, for Danny Fields, seems to have accidentally become a pathbreaker for feminism ('a kind of early form of women's liberation'), a muse for poets, and someone whose beauty transcends sexual preferences, but also a helpless ingénue (Fields, quoted in Stein and Plimpton 2006: 225, 228). Stephen Koch writes, in an early study of Warhol called *Stargazer*, that Sedgwick

like all denizens of the [Warhol] Factory, both male and female . . . glows with absolutely self-absorbed narcissism, and, God knows, she played the game of posturing chic everyone else around her played. For a few glittering months, the razor-cut cap of streaked blond hair, the thick eyebrows and lavish but meticulous eye make-up, the huge loop earrings, were *le dernier cri* [i.e. the latest word in fashion]. But there was also something else residing in that face, that carriage of her frail body – perhaps a certain rich girl's self-confidence, a certain unshakable attention to the real, a certain belief in the truths of her presence as a woman.

([1973] 1991: 67)

And indeed the unhappy comeuppance for Sedgwick, as per the trajectory of *La Dolce Vita*, existed too: the film *Ciao! Manhattan* (John Palmer and

David Weisman, 1972), released posthumously, seemed to chart her downfall and distress. Fields notes, of Sedgwick, a kind of star energy that may, siren-like, lure admirers to their fates: of Edie and other Warhol stars, ‘. . . they were very destructive people – self-destructive and other-people-destructive. They were riding the whirlwind’ (Fields, quoted in Stein and Plimpton 2006: 226).⁵ Indeed, this type became part of the mythology of these times: Russ Meyer’s *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) spoofs the superstar diva, with Ashley St. Ives (Edy Williams) pursued by aspirant lovers and Svengalis. And Betty Davis’s ‘He Was a Big Freak’ (1974) lists the ways in which the singer revels in her erotic powers over men: now a ‘turquoise chain’ has replaced Hayes’s blingy chains of gold, and is used by the singer, she boasts, for sexual domination. (Hannah M. Strong, Gina Sandí Díaz and Shawna Shipley-Gates all engage, in this volume, with contemporary ideas of revolutionary eroticism as empowerment.)

So to call someone a ‘diva’ can be an acknowledgement of their unique stardom, but it can also be a slight or a warning. That ‘diva’ description could mean criticism of ‘diva-like behaviour’ (and, in our context, this is an important point: advice not to book a performer for a concert further to anecdotes about their backstage interactions with others, or elaborate or finicky refreshment demands in riders – anecdotes that can riff off a variety of prejudices), or it could just be a bit of humorous side-eye, further to one-off moments. Even divas themselves seem confused:

[Duchess of Sussex Meghan] Markle used the word ‘diva’ of [Mariah] Carey, and Mariah replied that Meghan had her own diva moments . . . ‘It stopped me in my tracks, when she called me a diva,’ Markle said, with great urgency, [and] you can almost hear her leaning forwards. ‘I started to sweat a little bit. I started squirming in my chair in this quiet revolt. Why would you say that? My mind was spinning with what nonsense had she read or clicked on that made her think that about me.’ OK, so clearly Mariah Carey thinks of the word as positive or neutral, while Meghan Markle thinks it is pejorative.

(Williams 2022)

One commonality then, across positive, neutral or pejorative understandings, is that the diva is a singular and stand-out presence – worthy of debate, impressively tough, unavoidably fierce.

All these qualities were arguably intrinsic to the survival of the diva singer figure in the post-war years of cultural marginalization in the West: we think of

the vamping and centrality of female guest vocalists in jazz bands of the 1950s (as with Anita O'Day, and with some of the endlessly touring greats of Dixieland, and Swing, such as Louis Armstrong), rather than just decorating album covers; the rapturous receptions, as met and matched by their performances, of the female singers in the concerts of the Harlem Cultural Festival in the late 1960s; the domestic violence suffered by Tina Turner at the hands of her mentor and collaborator Ike in the 1970s, even as her star rose; more generally, the precarious and dangerous positions that even famous divas have historically found themselves in, as explored by Whiteley (2005); or the ways in which the New York voguing scene transformed street hustlers and rent boys into downtown ballroom stars in the 1980s, as documented in *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingstone, 1990).⁶ In all this resilience and survival, something quite different to Warhol's conception of superstardom seems to have been in operation: the maxim that anyone or everyone can be a star for a finite period in the media age (for Warhol, euphemistically: fifteen minutes), or that star quality can be plucked and curated by Warhol and his associates from the most unlikely of places or walks of life, does not apply to the diva. These divas seem to need to be born with talent, nurture it even in adversity, and practice and work without stopping. For Afrika Bambaataa, on hip-hop, '[i]t's about survival, economics, and keeping our people moving on' (cited in Hebdige 2004: 223). From this vantage point, Warhol's *modus operandi* seems one of an apolitical white privilege.

Prior to this rise of the diva, around the millennium, the diva figure often existed, and was germinated, in pop cultures parallel to the mainstream. Studies of MTV in the 1980s, understood to be the catalyst in terms of pop culture of the last few generations, invariably need to grapple with the operative hierarchy of promotion, with non-white performers mostly absent or offered 'specialist' spaces, aligned with music not identified with whiteness, and with something of the same marginalization for non-heterosexual, or even non-male, artists.⁷ The movement from the margins to the mainstream has occurred in parallel, over the last two decades, for two groups that now jointly exert a central influence over contemporary culture and politics: female r'n'b and hip-hop artists, and feminist thinkers and activists. The coming together of these two groups and sensibilities has redefined contemporary popular music (in all senses of music of Black origin), and wider culture and politics, in the West. And this ascendancy has also occurred at the point of the multimediaization or cross-platforming of the star, for

a more diffuse and complex celebrity culture, [for which the] new modes of analysis needed have had to expand their scope and extend their range and, it should be added, enhance their methodologies. The impact of developments such as gossip blogging, the emergence of reality television, and the increased power, influence and reach of the paparazzi have all come to function as central concerns . . . Celebrity culture, now no longer confined to the realms of down-market gossip magazines, is to be found as fully embedded within all spheres of popular media.

(Edgar, Fairclough and Halligan 2013: 16)

And, in or across this, and as flooding out via social media platforms, comes a counter-strategy from the diva. This is the movement towards (as indicated by Sasha Fierce – but it is a tendency that characterized David Bowie’s career) ‘a more subtle aesthetic blend of “person” and persona’, as Manghani and McDonald identify in relation to Kylie Minogue’s media presence (2013: 233). In this, the diva superstar quotient remains undiminished, constantly refreshing their mythical persona, but this is now offset by gestures towards homely authenticity, a ‘realness’, and an intimacy with fans. And for every upwards construction of this story (from bedroom wannabe singer to global diva) seems to come a downward collapse (the global diva revealed to be less than the sum of their parts as the façade crumbles – a particularly contemporary morality tale that was explored, to the horror of many, in Paul Verhoeven’s 1995 film *Showgirls*; see Nayman 2014). And yet both types of stories illustrate the way in which there has been an emboldening and centring of the female singer figure.

Contemporary feminisms

This emboldening and centring of the female singer figure is often found in sound mixing and vocal delivery: singing so as to, at times, cut across the musical backing, even dwarfing it in the mix, and with imperfections or human inflexions included, as if marks of an impetuous attitude towards professional delivery, or marks of fierceness or asides, or evidencing a shared intimacy. This is described as

a seeming anarchic disregard for the structure of the song: during ‘Gotta Work’ (in [Amerie’s] album version, from *Because I Love It*, 2007) the lyrics of the verse crash into and then across (to the point of almost three bars) the chorus, as if

too much needs to be said, and too urgently, to cut the discourse in deference to the chorus. The inclusion of extraneous, personal material (such as Taylor Swift's giggle, after the lyric 'I go on too many dates,' for the 2014 single 'Shake It Off' but there is a laugh on 'Gotta Work' as well), can be read in just such a way too.

(Halligan 2015: 296)

Such a propensity may then be aligned with third wave feminism, which meshed an emboldening with an unapologetic, sometimes party-oriented attitude, coupled with a tendency to loudness (in both senses).

By the early/mid-1990s, the notion of a third wave of feminism had not yet fully formed or was still a matter of some confusion or debate. This was an intermezzo moment, as it were, between understood periods of feminism.⁸ Or, at least, third wave feminism had not yet come to be understood in the ways that it has been since the mid-2000s. When a critical mass was achieved, third wave feminism was typically read as a matter of straight empowerment (and with the trajectories and goals of empowerment then becoming the foundation of tensions between second and third wave feminists) – as per the outspoken 'gobbiness' of the Spice Girls, whose six singles of 1996–7 established such an attitude, branded 'Girl Power'. That is: six singles and five Spice Girls – totalling thirty female articulations on constant radio airplay across twenty-four months, from petulant, sexualized aspiration ('Wannabe' of 1996) to the sassy weaponization of sexuality to achieve ambitions ('Who Do You Think You Are' of 1997), in a way that anticipated or maybe even in part prompted Catherine Hakim's theorization of 'erotic capital' – divisive in the debated transition from second to third wave feminism – as the very potential (in the sense of intrinsic power) of contemporary woman (2011). Either side of the intermezzo, at least in terms of media stereotypes, are the superfeminine: exponents of erotic capital (one thinks of TLC's *CrazySexyCool* of 1994, complete with booty-call sampled audio), 'rock chicks' (Lister's 'Liliths' figures, often modelled on Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac; 2001), 'virtual idols' (such as Hatsune Miku and Lil Miquela; see Conner 2016, Zaborowski 2016, and Rambarran 2021), 'K-pop' girl groups (such as Blackpink and Red Velvet), or post-punk singers (particularly in Riot Grrrl, but seen too in 1990s 'indie' figures such as Alanis Morissette, Courtney Love or Sophie B. Hawkins). This indie category nearly included Mariah Carey too, who recorded a 'secret' 'alt-rock' album, *Someone's Ugly Daughter* in 1995 (see Monroe 2022). But prior to this, and indeed to the present, the visual presentation of Carey was invariably of the superfeminine template: LP gatefolds effectively reworked as soft porn centrefolds.

Academic writing around the emergence of third wave feminism typically articulates the movement away from concerns that were understood to be confined to the margins (of second wave feminist cultures), and often focusing on strategies of living, to a cultural war to be waged in the mainstream (third wave feminism). It is worth briefly reviewing the perceptions on this 'shifting . . . terrain' (Rivers 2017: 3) at this point, around the period of the postfeminist intermezzo. An early key text, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Heywood and Drake 1997), devotes one of its four sections to 'Youth Music Culture' and, as can be expected, mostly concerns the progressive gender politics associated with punk and then traces a development into the music associated with Riot Grrrl in the 1990s, with a critique of the gender politics of mainstream rock and variants of rap, via bell hooks, ending the collection (Niesel 1997). By 2004, the concern with 'Politics and Popular Culture' (for *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*; Gillis, Howie and Munford [2004] 2007) is disconcertingly mainstream, with a scope that takes in video games, women's fashion/lifestyle magazines, fantasy television series, pop music charts and romcoms. In this context, the British girl group Girls Aloud are found wanting when considered in relation to the Spice Girls – the former noted as self-identifying as 'girl's girls', so that '[n]ot even the "nod" to a feminist inheritance imparted by the Spice Girls' can be detected (Munford 2007: 267). Rebecca Munford's discussion is structured by a consideration of the fatal potentials of 'postfeminism' within 'third wave feminism'. In Munford's conceptualization, third wave feminism is a legitimate outgrowth of second wave feminism, and is apparent, in its subversive operations and unapologetic in-your-face presences, in Riot Grrrl in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the sexed-up 'girly' variant of feminist empowerment is associated with the Spice Girls, with Girls Aloud as their lesser acolytes and with various other media, particularly the magazine *BUST* (self-announced as 'that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting'; quoted in Munford 2007: 266) – and this unavoidable occurrence in the mainstream is one that 'opens up a space for patriarchal recuperation as girl power emerges as the site of that dangerous and deceptive slippage between third wave feminism and post-feminism' (2007: 276). So for Munford, third wave feminism holds the promise of a continuum with the rich radicalism of the second wave – providing that an apolitical and apathetic postfeminist current does not derail the development.⁹ The Spice Girls' 'Girl Power', however, despite or even because of its zesty presence in the mainstream, is manageable and marketable, and is a faux-feminism, de-fanged by the male éminence grise – a

defeat of female liberatory politics through a process labelled postfeminism. Such a transformation needs the basic category error: the passage from one culture to the next, with (ideological) baggage jettisoned at the border – a process which Munford also sees as a crossing when she writes, '[t]he alacrity with which the media has embraced "girl power" and its icons indicates the precarious boundary between the "(re)fashioning" of feminism proposed by the third wave Girlies and the "fashionable" (post-)feminism propounded by the Spice Girls . . .' (2007: 274).

Arguably the issue in the late 1990s cultural landscape was that previous generation's iterations of the sexually upfront and empowered female singer had represented a sequential calibration of these two attributes: she was empowered, and from a position of empowerment 'flaunted' sexuality in everyday situations. One thinks of the album covers of Carly Simon's 1972 *No Secrets* or Linda Ronstadt's 1976 *Hasten Down the Wind*: both singers bra-less, photographed as if caught mid-conversation (Simon perhaps stepping out of a house, Ronstadt at a beach party), their erect nipples visibly pressing through the thin gauze of their tops. The stripper-like performance of Girls Aloud, in their dancing and striking of poses for the 2003 'No Good Advice' video (which included the classic podium move of reaching down to the client, levelling cleavage to his face), merges the two: the flaunting of sexuality *is* (indeed, as per Hakim) empowerment.

However, scholars of hip-hop have historically looked with despair at such sexualization since the yin to this yang is an aggressive, at times repulsive, reassertion of patriarchy and boosting that which Moya Bailey identifies as 'misogynoir'. (2021) And this issue, and the damage associated with it, seems the first port of call for those who have written about hip-hop. For Pough:

Many would question the subtitle of [my] article – 'Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop' – specifically the notion that there is indeed any potential to tap in Hip-Hop. Those people would list *ad nauseam* the numerous instances of violence, sexism, and misogyny as well as the glorification of drug use and drug sales described in contemporary rap music. They would list certain rappers who have been arrested for these acts and the recent deaths of young Black male rappers as reason enough to surmise that there is indeed no potential to tap in Hip-Hop. Those same people would probably tell us that this entire generation of young people is a lost cause because of reasons ranging from apathy to selfishness.

(2004: 283)

For Neal, even a semi-apologetic contextualization of such problematic attitudes cannot absolve the musicians, whose stances also function to the ends of the exclusion of women hip-hop artists on their own terms:

Rap music and hip-hop culture have often been singularly cited for the transmission and reproduction of sexism and misogyny in American society . . . [a]s sexism and misogyny are largely extensions of normative patriarchal privilege, their reproduction in the music of male hip-hop artists speaks more powerfully to the extent that these young men (particularly young black men) are invested in that privilege than it does to any evidence that they are solely responsible for its reproduction . . . But there is also no denying the fact that hip-hop's grip on American youth allows for the circulation of sexist and misogynistic narratives in a decidedly uncritical fashion.

The embrace of patriarchal privilege by some male hip-hop artists partly explains the marginalization of women among hip-hop artists, particularly when those women don't conform to the normative roles assigned to women within hip-hop (the chicken-head groupie, oversexualized rhyme-splitter, baggy-clothed desexualized mic-fiend are prime examples).

(Neal 2004: 247)

Pough and Neal both consider the rebarbative aspects of this culture to be, in part, media spin, as does Rose – citing Chuck D's maxim: 'Don't believe the hype!' (2004: 291) But negotiating this culture, with respect to being a feminist, has itself generated writing that has sought to consider empowerment within these meshes. This is most notable in the writing of Joan Morgan (1999), self-described as a 'hip-hop feminist', who tends to reject the 'victim' label, and subverts the idea of the submissiveness of the 'chicken head' (i.e. serial fellator). But, in this context, the appeal of Riot Grrrl to feminist academics is quite clear. Riot Grrrl was a point of entry into feminist consciousness for a certain generation of female punk singers, often with frictions around a censorious late phase of second wave feminism,¹⁰ which had equipped the Grrrls with the tools of critique, emboldened them to speak – or shout/scream – out, and conceptualized the idea of anger as a vector for speaking up, and performance, and public persona (Marcus 2010: 122–3). This made for a very particular type: as with Kathleen Hanna's dancing, grimacing and appearance in Sonic Youth's 'Bull in the Heather' (1994) – grotesque, cutesy, infantile, aggressive. Tellingly, then, Sini Anderson's 2013 documentary on Hanna, *The Punk Singer*, begins with a 1991 spoken-word performance in which a young Hanna, if not performing as a character, is then seemingly reliving the trauma of being sexually abused – possibly by a family member, possibly as a child, intoning 'I'm going to tell everyone what you did to me.' That 'telling' is presented as the *raison d'être* and

indeed political strategy of Riot Grrrl, which remained radical, avenging and oppositional, and forged from trauma – a considerable distance from, if not another universe altogether to, the allure of Girl Power, or the allotted functions of the groupie.

By the 2020s, and with apologies to Munford, we need to dispense with the optimism invested in the nascent third wave idea. Munford's idea of postfeminism came to subsume Munford's idea of third wave feminism, and so third wave feminism came to denote the depoliticized, un-sisterly, self-empowering offshoot/degeneration of second wave feminism. This idea of or hope for a legitimate second to third wave development gave way to a generational split between the two. But third wave feminism, nevertheless, represented a form of striving for gain whereas the issue with the term 'postfeminist' was that it suggested that the basis of equality had been achieved, at least in terms of women in the workplace, legal protections, the shattering of glass ceilings and so on. The assumption of postfeminism is one of achieved privilege and that striving was over. That is: the generation of (white) women born in the West in the 1960s/1970s had then come of age in a moment of historical enlightenment, and could readily claim a bounty comparable to their male counterparts. The postfeminist condition is one that presupposes that the potentials of privilege are realizable – if indeed they have not already been entirely realized. To be clear: we have no wish to be critical in terms of what would then be considered, in terms of intersectionality, as an unthinking failure to question or interrogate one's privilege ('positionality') or hold the realization of this privilege up as a goal for the still-oppressed. In the work of innumerable feminists who have grappled with questions of representations and role models, it is apparent both that privileged layers need to be considered in tandem with the less privileged, and that privilege is in itself no safeguard against male violence (as per the Everyday Sexism Project, #MeToo and related campaigns from 2017 onwards). Fourth wave feminism then needs to be considered in this context: taking the fight back to the oppressors, often using social media for internet activism – to mount public critiques, of both individuals and institutions, and achieving something too familiar from the second wave, for Blevins (2018): 'consciousness-raising'. The chapters in this collection track and reflect on just such occurrences, and sometimes use them as raw data for analysis in respect to the diva, the diva's detractors and new identifications of forms of oppression – such as misogynoir. In so doing, this work offers a definition to the newly emergent fourth wave.

Writing about divas

For these reasons, and in this context, we have encouraged personal, subjective writing from some of our contributors, as a way of offering, in part, case studies of particular lines of empathy or appreciation. The resultant writing, within the constellation of fourth wave feminism, has evidenced patterns of (in the best sense) sloganeering: pithy calls-to-action and sound-bite foundations for wider and often impassioned critiques, rather than the construction of layers of reasoning that deepen through ever-further-nuanced lines of argument. Elsewhere, we have asked contributors to consider the multimedia elements of the diva presence: not just recorded music, and not just live music, but an infinite number of interventions – on social media and on broadcast media before that. For this reason, we have ensured that an expansion of diva culture occurs in this book – into fields of comedy and theatre, and even broadcast sports events – so as to scope and assess the wider hinterland of divadom, or the persistence of the diva across contemporary popular culture, and to break the cultural tendency out of the confines of popular musicology.

The first section of this book looks at key moments in the rise to power of the contemporary diva. The four figures discussed are each distinguished by their particular contributions to diva culture. Mariah Carey, for Shara Rambarran, is positioned as, effectively, the diva template across the turn of the millennium – but her fabulousness does not exclude the legacies of a difficult childhood, the experiences of the erasure of her creative work (and even ethnic identity), the sexism visited upon her, and the ways in which she has addressed these challenges in respect to their impacts on her well-being. Whitney Houston, for Gwynne George, offers a parallel exemplar: a figure who displayed her labour as part of her creativity, considered in the context of the persistence of damaging racial stereotypes concerning women of colour. Dolly Parton, for James Reeves, offers lessons for the long haul: a singer and presence who seems adept at change and self-reinvention and has utilized as much to attain creative independence, and her iconographic status, but who seemingly remains true to herself across all such phases (which Reeves periodizes). Mark Duffett's consideration of Grace Jones ends this section: the diva perceived as a contrarian and live wire – but who, Duffett argues in the case of Jones, needs to be interpreted in a global rather than local context, with 'being a diva' read in respect to resisting structural racism and aligned to economic power in the new celebrity economy.

Our second section addresses the contemporary diva and presents a series of snapshots of key figures accordingly. Benjamin Halligan considers the bridging figure of Aaliyah – whom he posits as central to the elevation of the diva into the starry firmament of popular culture beyond the turn of the millennium. But Halligan addresses an issue at the outset which is far from unusual: that the life of this late diva is now inextricably entwined with stories of coercion and abuse. Consequently, Halligan seeks to extract or free Aaliyah's music from this context in order to restore to it the acclaim that, he argues, it deserves. Beyond this, Halligan considers the use of the aesthetics of religious iconography by the diva, including via social media and, for an encounter with Amerie, in the live context. Halligan notes that the maximal presentation of Aaliyah's voice, when coupled with the forthright sexual nature of her later lyrics, seemed shocking – even to a comical degree. Hannah M. Strong's engagement with Beyoncé checks back on as much, but now in the context of #MeToo activism, and the way in which her live performance at Coachella in 2018 provocatively usurped and reversed gender dynamics. For Strong, this is an important marker with respect to the way in which #MeToo politically radicalized pop culture and with a figure such as Beyoncé lending heft and legitimation to this through her global reach. Nonetheless, paradoxes are apparent, in the combination of 'flashy feminist messages flanked by heteronormative and male-centred imagery'. For Dorothy Finan, the career of Amuro Namie contains comparable tensions: the transition from teen pop star to adult r'n'b and hip-hop diva, via looking to and reworking (at times problematically), for her Japanese fans, African American music culture. This is read as denoting a coming into a (postfeminist) maturity on the part of this diva and Finan considers Amuro as, eventually, an establishment figure – performing at high-profile national events, such as the twenty-sixth G8 summit of 2000 for example – further cementing her iconographic status, and boosting her 'epocal charisma'. The latter is contextualized with respect to a postmodern reading of Japanese society with Amuro's fandom read as a way of negotiating social and political changes.

Timmia Hearn DeRoy considers Janelle Monáe's re-enactments of histories of enslavement, via Afrofuturist aesthetics. DeRoy details the complicated layers of meaning apparent in Monáe performances and personae, as read to the ends of deconstructing and reconstructing a vision of the future, and the American Dream, beyond white bourgeois power. A similar liberatory impulse informs Shawna Shipley-Gates's reading of Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion: to discuss the revolutionary potentials of eroticism in Black female hip-hop – in their

unabashed and unapologetic expressions of, or channelling of, sexual exuberance. This intervention situates their music as within, and yet critical of, the patriarchal apparatus and arrangements of historical hip-hop traditions. One such realized potential of this hip-hop eroticism is a reclaiming of female autonomy: to author one's own persona, to eroticize one's own body (irrespective of its conforming or otherwise to received 'norms') and speak with one's own voice, as thrillingly enhanced by the kinds of explicit details that even, say, Aaliyah at her most sexualized had parleyed into euphemisms. Thus vaginal lubrication becomes, for Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, an affective matter: to talk of their biological evidence of liberation and taking back control of sexuality and desire on the part of the vagina-owner. And yet Gates notes some distance between feminism *per se*, and hip-hop feminism, with the latter galvanizing practitioners to engage in elements of hypersexualized self-presentation that would traditionally have come under fire from second wave feminists. This discussion in itself offers solace to those who have found the often backward sexual politics of hip-hop enough to remove the culture from any sense of progressive art.

Gina Sandí Díaz turns to the controversy that greeted the performances from Jennifer Lopez and Shakira for the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show, tracking the biases and prejudices apparent in the rhetoric of critics (both professional and denizens of social media). The offence, in this reading, is the way in which two global majority (and middle-aged) women so spectacularly occupied a space typically understood to function to extoll or celebrate values coded as geographically specific (to North America), and as white and politically conformist. Díaz deftly splices intersectional theory into ideas of divadom in order to identify and delineate affective, everyday oppressions, in a continuum with some of the darkest moments of colonialism. Thereafter, Nicole Hodges Persley explores what is effectively a postcolonial position of cosmopolitanism with respect to the work (and media presences) of Drake and Nicki Minaj. Persley argues that they intentionally manipulate the simultaneously Black transnational contexts that their bodies occupy, subverting racial and gender norms associated with the global concept of diva culture. In so doing, they effectively capitalize on, and advance, the ontological status of being a diva.

The final section in this collection considers the diva in contexts outside popular music. Harriet Reed turns to the relatively new phenomenon of museum and gallery curation around acclaimed (but popular) musicians – particularly with respect to the ways in which this has upset or revised received notions of artistic worth. Rana Esfandiary considers the figure of the diva in the charged political

context of a production of Jean Genet's *The Maids* in Iran, tracing connections between assumed interpersonal power dynamics and the performative aspect of the diva figure. Rachel E. Blackburn, Ellie Tomsett and Nathalie Weidhase, in the final two chapters, consider the diva in respect to stand-up comedy – that is, the ways in which these figures, noted earlier as exemplars and templates, are imagined (or reimagined) in other areas of emboldened outspokenness, and the often comic distance that is established between the glamour of the diva, and the relatable everyday experiences of the comic. Two different tensions are explored: for Blackburn, the racial undertones of the reception of diasporic figures, for Tomsett and Weidhase, the gendered and raced dynamics of the inclusion of diva figures in the discourse of stand-up.

In these respects, in or through the gallery, theatre or in stand-up, the diva addresses us, or the diva's presence imposes itself on us, all – or, from the diva's exalted perspective, you all, or, as per the emcee or DJ cry or invitation: 'Y'all! We find ourselves continually in the presence of the diva when thinking about contemporary popular music and wider culture: a condition of 'the diva and us'.

Notes

- 1 Hayes's music at this point – particularly on the Stax released *Hot Buttered Soul* (1969) – was also suitably epic: very lengthy tracks, building steadily to their climaxes, and often covers that were subject to Hayes's unique, eroticized soul-ification. In 1971 Hayes had presented himself as the titular *Black Moses* – presumably offering to lead his people to a promised land, away from persecution. Jackson introduced Hayes by slowly pulling back the hood of his cape – revealing the star to the Wattstax audience as they cheered wildly.
On the Watts Riots, see Horne (1995), and on the concert, see Phillips (2014); on neoliberal pop and wealth, see Halligan (2017); on Motown's politics, see Smith (1999).
- 2 The writer and producer of the 1998 *VH1 Divas* was Martin Lewis, who had co-created and co-produced another music- and entertainment-based event with political ideals: the *Secret Policeman's Ball* series of benefit shows, for Amnesty International. The human rights cause of the organization was particularly pointed and, in the context of the times, oppositional – as resoundingly apparent in Peter Gabriel's performance of 'Biko' for the 1987 event, with its invitation to the audience to join in, and militant gestures of international solidarity with the struggle against apartheid-era South Africa.

- 3 On trans activism and the Stonewall riots, and particularly the figure of Sylvia Rivera, see Feinberg (1998). In terms of our discussion of divas, We move away from cis-gendered assumptions to a non-binary framing. Nonetheless, it is necessary to reserve the right to talk of the 'female', particularly in historical contexts, in respect to acknowledging how the idea of the 'female singer' was itself an important intervention into musical cultures.
- 4 Beyoncé's particular feminism, in terms of its efficacy and even orthodoxy, remains a wider matter of debate, as per hooks, but see too Weidhase (2015).
- 5 Fields was an associate of Warhol's and a friend of Sedgwick's, and a manager, writer and publicist.
- 6 On Turner, see Turner (2018); on *Paris is Burning*, see Hilderbrand (2013).
- 7 For a discussion of MTV's attempts to right this balance, by the early 1990s, see Goldstein (1996: 262–79).
- 8 On this 'intermezzo', see Lotz (2007: 73) or, for the 'shifting . . . terrain' of feminist ideas at this juncture, see Rivers (2017: 3).
- 9 Munford articulates this position with reference to Germaine Greer and Susan Faludi; (2007: 267).
- 10 See Marcus (2010: 41–2) for Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna on Faludi, and arguing with Andrea Dworkin.

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