

© Copyright 2018

Kait LaPorte

The Cornfield's Monster Diva: CeWEBrity Leslie Hall Takes Midwest Stereotypes to Camp

Kait LaPorte

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2018

Reading Committee:

Dr. Christina Sunardi, Chair

Dr. Shannon Dudley

Dr. Amanda Swarr

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Music

University of Washington

Abstract

The Cornfield's Monster Diva: CeWEBrity Leslie Hall Takes Midwest Stereotypes to Camp

Kait LaPorte

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Christina Sunardi
Ethnomusicology

This dissertation analyzes the music videos and persona of internet celebrity Leslie Hall. I demonstrate how the widely circulated narrative that any ordinary person can become famous on YouTube created the ideal setting for Hall's Midwest shtick to attain fame. Further, I show how Hall campily and deliberately embodies Midwestern stereotypes in order to make fun of the representations of the region as an historic, forgotten one. Building on that, I assert that Hall queers the Midwest by juxtaposing the tacky and the ordinary, giving voice to Midwestern queerness and pushing back against the Hollywood glamour of mainstream gay iconicity. Building on my discussion of the ways in which Hall queers the Midwest and pushes against the region's alleged heteronormativity, I explore how Hall's work reveals the relationship between fatness and monstrosity in American

society, and utilizes this association in order to call attention to it. In so doing, Hall paints a new picture of the Midwest in which it is queer, famous, and monstrous.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>LIST OF FIGURES</u>	<u>iv</u>
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>	<u>vi</u>
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>1</u>
<i>Profile of a Midwest Diva</i>	4
<i>Intervention</i>	6
<i>This Is How We Go</i>	12
<i>Signifi-cat</i>	16
<i>Chapter Outline</i>	18
<i>Presenting Another Midwest Diva: Me</i>	21
<u>CHAPTER ONE. ORDINARY CELEBRITY AND THE INTERNET'S BIGGEST FAN</u>	<u>24</u>
<i>YouTube: A History</i>	25
<i>Leslie Hall's Fame</i>	34
<i>Leslie Hall and the YouTube Community</i>	38
<i>YouTube: The "Weird Part of the Internet"</i>	45
<i>Leslie Hall's Fan Community</i>	48
<i>Willow Don't Cry</i>	55
<u>CHAPTER TWO. THE PIONEER WOMAN OF GEM SWEATERS: CAMPING MIDWESTERN FEMININITIES</u>	<u>59</u>
<i>Camp is in Session</i>	60
<i>Corn and Cold</i>	64
<i>The Rural Housewife Goes to Camp</i>	68
<i>Churn the Butter</i>	75

<i>Queen of the Gems</i>	78
<i>Conclusion</i>	91
<u>CHAPTER THREE. SOMEWHERE OVER THE CORNFIELD: LESLIE HALL'S MIDWESTERN GAY ICONICITY</u>	92
<i>From "Are You a Friend of Dorothy" to Political Advocacy</i>	93
<i>A Star is Born</i>	96
<i>Shazam She's Glamorous</i>	102
<i>Cher of the Internet Age</i>	108
<i>Junior Gems & Little Monsters</i>	111
<i>Hot Pocket People & Marching Bands</i>	114
<i>Married by a Midwest Diva</i>	118
<i>Mainstream Commercialism vs the Queer DIY</i>	122
<i>Conclusion in the Key of Gold</i>	124
<u>CHAPTER FOUR. THE MONSTER ON MAIN STREET</u>	125
<i>Cultural Constructions of Human Monstrosity</i>	127
<i>The Delight and Disgust of the Fat Monster</i>	130
<i>The Obeastity Epidemic</i>	132
<i>The Fat Zombie</i>	134
<i>A Case of Corn-fed, Unwed, Drop-Dead Girl</i>	137
<i>Green Screen Monstrous Queen</i>	144
<i>Hungry for Brains, They Seek Some Satisfaction</i>	149
<i>Zombie Killer 2.0</i>	154
<i>Conclusion</i>	161

AFTERWORD	162
<i>Intervention (Not The Reality TV Show)</i>	164
<i>Some Topics Left Behind</i>	165
<i>Leslie Hall: Our Past and Our Future</i>	169
WORKS CITED	173

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Screenshot from the “Destination Friendship Tour Teaser” in which Hall’s face is extremely close to the camera, the font of the band name matching her bright pink lipstick.

Figure 2: Screenshot from “Destination Friendship Tour Teaser” in which Hall makes awkward facial expressions as the announcer says “feminine gazes.” She is wearing a ruffle top and has a tiny straw hat perched on her head.

Figure 3: Screenshot from “Shake Your Hips” wherein Snares recreates a tactic from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” in which small images of the LYs are juxtaposed over a close-up of Hall’s face.

Figure 4: Screenshot from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” in which small images of the LYs are juxtaposed over a close-up of Hall’s face

Figure 5: Screenshot from “Shake Your Hips” in which three images of Snares’ body rolls are layered over one another.

Figure 6: Screenshot from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” wherein multiple images of Hall’s body rolls are seen in the same shot.

Figure 7: Screenshot from “Shake Your Hips” in which Snares uses his arms to scoot from one side of the shot to another as Hall does in “Tight Pants / Body Rolls.”

Figure 8: Screenshot from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” wherein Hall uses her arms to scoot from one side of the shot to another.

Figure 9: Neon tree and grass are layered over and around Hall in “Willow Don’t Cry.” Screenshot from YouTube.

Figure 10: The juxtaposition of all three band members walking in gravel in similar shoes. Screenshot from “Gravel In My Shoe” video on YouTube.

Figure 11: The three band members standing in an open field behind their husbands who are holding a beer and sitting down, and all played by the same actor. Screenshot from “Gravel Video” on YouTube.

Figure 12: Copious amounts of gravel pouring from a shoe. Screenshot from “Gravel in My Shoe” on YouTube.

Figure 13: The chorus to “Gravel In My Shoe,” wherein Hall jumps a seventh and switches registers, resembling the vocal break common in yodeling. Transcription by author.

Figure 14: Hall uses vocables in her head voice, again mimicking yodeling. Transcription by author.

Figure 15: The drag queen Divine in the John Waters film *Pink Flamingos*, wearing even more over-the-top eyeshadow than Leslie Hall, who claims Divine as an inspiration. Photo courtesy of flickr user Craig Duffy.

Figure 16: Mimi Bobeck from *The Drew Carey Show*, whose eyeshadow and tacky clothing are very Leslie Hall. Photo courtesy of The Drew Carey Show Wiki.

Figure 17: Roseanne wears not only a bejeweled sweater in Season 7, Episode 9, but a sweater covered in faux jewelry! Photo courtesy of tumblr user thirddanddelaware.

Figure 18: Roseanne wears a Queen of Hearts gem sweater at a Las Vegas casino in Season 4 Episode 8. Photo courtesy of tumblr user thirddanddelaware.

Figure 19: Screenshot from Hall's website, where she sells "Midwest Diva Stretchy Pants."

Figure 20: Screenshot from page 2 of Hall's "Gallery of Glamore" (Leslie Hall, n.d.).

Figure 21: Hall and the LYs strike a pose in a cornfield, their flashy outfits contrasting with the rurality of the corn. Photo courtesy of Pinterest user Peggy Whitson.

Figure 22: Screenshot from Hall's "Blame the Booty" video on YouTube, in which she uses a lens that distorts her body in the manner of a funhouse mirror, calling attention to her size.

Figure 23: Screenshot from Hall's "Blame the Booty" video on YouTube, in which multiple layers of Hall are layered over one another, causing her to take up most of the space in the shot.

Figure 24: Hall rolls her body in two ways in "Tight Pants." Because of the green screen, she has a neon green outline around her body, giving her appearance an alien quality. Screenshot from YouTube.

Figure 25: A screenshot from Hall's original "Zombie Killer" video on YouTube, in which we see Hall surrounded by smoke and pointing a gun. The camera is very close to her face.

Figure 26: Hall wears a cape featuring a sequined image of her face, which is making a grotesque expression. Screenshot from "Zombie Killer Revisited" on YouTube.

Figure 27: Hall's opening face in "Zombie Killer Revisited" is grotesque. Screenshot from "Zombie Killer Revisited" on YouTube.

Figure 28: Dina Martina, in overdone blue eyeshadow, blush, and red lipstick, looks inquisitively at a variety of decorated cupcakes. Photo courtesy of Out.com.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank my committee members. To Christina, my committee chair and adviser, I never could have done all of this without you. Not only have you helped me shape my thinking over these many years (nine!), but you have always supported the ways I was different, the ways I didn't fit neatly into our discipline. Throughout this dissertation process, you have read countless drafts, many of which were terrible, and helped me polish these bits of gravel into gems. Thank you for your invaluable patience and guidance. Thank you also to Shannon Dudley, who showed many of us that to enjoy music was to do it with others and to understand it deeply, and who always pushed me to think more critically about the political implications of music. To Amanda Swarr, thank you for letting me follow you to almost every class you taught and always helping me delve deeper into considering all that "queer" could mean. The ways you taught me to think about methodologies, feminism, and queerness have been incredibly influential to my work, as has your permission to unapologetically critique. And to Tony Lucero and María Elena Garcia, I owe so much of my thinking about borders (including human/monster) and the political significance of art to your teaching, and those ideas have been truly formative for this work.

Thank you also to the amazing community of graduate students of the UW ethnomusicology program: Julia, Andre, Jim, Maren, David, Joe, Claire, Jocelyn, Bonnie, and Hilary. What would I have done without you? From theory schmeory and abstract parties to life lessons about how to dress in the Seattle winter and many amusing social occasions,

it has been so great to grow with you. And to those of you working on your dissertation now, you 100% got this.

In addition to my departmental colleagues, graduate student friends from other departments and universities have been an indispensable resource for commiseration and intellectual growth. In particular, Logan O’Laughlin, my informal dissertation coach and hilariously punny friend, who taught me many things, among them the concept of “the valley of shit,” which helped me push through some of the toughest times of this process. We will make donuts and write about animal celebrities when this is all over, I promise.

Another source of commiseration and general joking about the struggles of academia is my mostly online-based graduate student friend group known as “the brunch brigade,” comprised of Karyn Medina (University of California – Davis), Sabine Parrish (Oxford University), and Jasmine Stork (Ohio State University). We are amazing and it’s been so much fun to have an equally sassy albeit far away sounding board. You also 100% got this.

In addition to my academic community, I also owe a gigantic thank you to my work squad--Desiree, Madeline, and Kim. Thank you for celebrating every deadline (of which there were so many, and many of them self-imposed), for tirelessly cheering me on, and for encouraging me to take time off and rest when I needed to. You always remind me that there is a light at the end of this tunnel, and that light is so much brighter because of you.

Thank you of course to my family, who put up with me moving two thousand miles away to do this and for cheering me on these many years. You have always made me feel supported, and that is not something that everyone can say. From benefit concerts and

plays to about a hundred graduations, you always showed up, and that means the world to me.

To my partner Whitney: you kept this boat afloat. Your unshakable emotional support is what has sustained me in times when this whole dissertation/working full time thing felt very unsustainable. I would have continued living off breakfast tacos and pea protein had you not taken care of me and inspired me to take care of myself. I love doing all the life with you.

To end on a light note, this wouldn't be a dissertation on Leslie Hall if I didn't talk about snacks, so here's a shout out to all the chocolate bars, garlic-stuffed olives, sparkling waters, cold brews, and glasses of red wine that were definitely harmed in the creation of this project.

*To all my Midwest Divas
and/or everyone queer in a cornfield*

“What interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary.” - Tom Boellstorff, Ethnography and Virtual Worlds

Introduction

Donning gold lamé pants, a ruffled glittery sweater, blue eye makeup and overstated glasses, Leslie Hall drives a horse-drawn carriage made of paper and cardboard. The horses are superimposed against the open prairie green screen background. Hall’s passengers are her bandmates, the LYs, who are wearing floppy bonnets in addition to their standard neon sunglasses. To the accompaniment of a low bass synth line, the deep-voiced announcer says “returning to your local community with more glitter and glam than ever: Leslie and the LYS!” the last part of which is spoken over an extreme close-up all of Hall’s face, the band name over top of it in a color that exactly matches Leslie’s hot pink lipstick (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Screenshot from the “Destination Friendship Tour Teaser” video on YouTube, in which Hall’s face is extremely close to the camera, the font of the band name matching her bright pink lipstick.

We then see Hall, extremely red in the face and twisting back and forth alone in a field of dirt. She is wearing a sparkly gold vest over a silky gold shirt, her standard bouffant disheveled, to which the voiceover says “with hardship.” Following this, the announcer goes on to list what else fans can expect from the tour. The word “cooperation” is spoken over a quick clip of Hall and seven other people, all donned in white turtlenecks with varying degrees of print and oversized glasses, scrunching their shoulders to their ears in unison. “Drama” accompanies a clip of the LYs in their floppy bonnets, riding on a visibly green screen horse in an open field. The announcer says “suspense, rage” over an image of a surly cat, after which he says “embraces” over a clip of Hall in a green screen wood cabin, embracing four bonneted heads while she smiles off into the distance. Among the other things the announcer says the tour will include are “spandex” and “combs,” the latter of which is stated over a close-up clip of a hairy-chested person wearing a colorful spandex outfit that exposes his chest hair, which he is combing downward.

Later on, Hall stands again in front of a green screen open field, wearing the ruffled lace shirt with her standard overdone makeup and oversized glasses, a tiny straw hat perching upon her bouffant. Her eyes dart awkwardly down and around the gaze of the camera as the announcer says “feminine gazes” (Figure 2). The video ends with the words “and of course, dancing,” which shows a close shot of Hall in her gold outfit in the muddy field again, sweating and stroking her face with a couple of fingers. The pink font appears again, this time saying “Invading your community! Please go to leslieandthelys.com for the city near you.”



Figure 2: Screenshot from “Destination Friendship Tour Teaser” on YouTube. Hall makes awkward facial expressions as the announcer says “feminine gazes.” She is wearing a ruffle top and has a tiny straw hat perched on her head, camping pioneer woman femininity.

The described video above, entitled “Destination Friendship Tour Teaser,” is not only a teaser for that particular tour, but for Hall’s work more generally. The juxtaposition of seemingly disparate elements of rurality, pioneer women’s clothing (e.g., bonnets), DIY green screen film techniques, flashy 1980s-esque dance clothing, and plain, outdated clothing from the late 20th century such as turtlenecks, come together to represent Hall’s particular brand of anachronistic hodgepodge. In addition to the multi-temporal visual elements of Hall’s work, behaviors such as the awkward looks that accompany “feminine gazes” (Figure 2) and the sweaty close-up of Hall at the end of the video indicate the deliberate failed femininity that imbues so much of Hall’s work. Further, with language such as “invading your community,” this tour teaser shows how Hall uses aesthetics of monster and alien.

It is this failed, monstrous femininity and this out-of-time(s) ragbag that this dissertation investigates. I assert that, by camping multiple Midwestern femininities, Hall

disrupts stereotypes of the region as being white, rural, and heteronormative. I show that Hall queers the Midwest through these anachronistic aesthetic elements, and gives voice to Midwestern queerness in her deliberate portrayal of rural areas and specific intent to achieve gay icon status. Further, I contend that Hall's side hustle as gay marriage host and officiant makes a mockery of the institution of marriage in its low-budget fashion and queer DIY-ness, pushing against the mainstream commercialism of the gay marriage movement even as it capitalizes on it. Finally, I demonstrate how Hall further disrupts the idea that the Midwest is white and normative by playing up the American association with fatness and monstrosity, refusing to be normative or conventional.

To develop and support this argument, I discuss the particular significance of YouTube as a platform that allows the quotidian, the weird, and (especially) the weird quotidian to become popular. I show that the site's users and the site itself frame YouTube as a platform on which ordinary people can become famous, and this narrative not only helped Hall attain fame, but also gave her a type of celebrityhood to perform (i.e. internet celebrityhood). Further, I demonstrate that the site's obsession with private quotidian moments created an ideal space in which to perform Midwesternness; Leslie Hall is your weird, Iowan neighbor who likes to snack and watch television all day when she's not too busy making bizarre videos for the internet, and the internet loves that!

Profile of a Midwest Diva

Leslie Hall is a satirical performance artist from Ames, Iowa. Hall originally attained fame in 2004, when she became an Internet celebrity (or "cewebriety," as she would call it) due to the popularity of her online gem sweater photo gallery named "Gallery of Glamore" (Leslie Hall n.d.). Over the last decade, Hall has accrued over four hundred gem sweaters

(Cohen 2008), and even created a gem sweater museum out of a mobile home that now resides in her parents' yard. As I'll discuss in chapter two, gem sweaters continue to be a big part of Hall's work. Even as Hall's artistic scope broadened from online gallery model to touring performer, gem sweaters continued to be an integral part of her shtick as the topic of several songs, as well as a means of connection with her fans, who appear at shows and online sporting gem sweaters, even sending them to Hall in the mail as tokens of their affection.

In terms of her musical fame, Hall rose to stardom out of necessity. When her website gemsweater.com became very popular, Hall received a bill to the tune of \$1,000 for bandwidth overuse, which enticed her to create a hip-hop album she could sell to make money to pay the bill. "OK, I'll put out a hip-hop album, sell CDs, get rich and famous, and this bill will go away. So, that's what I did. I just made some songs about style," says Hall in an NPR interview (Cohen). Hall crafts all of her music using the free Apple program GarageBand, and the vast amounts of loops available to her in the GarageBand library has permitted her to play with a variety of aesthetics and sonic signs--only some of which sound similar to hip-hop, but also sound like funk, country, indie folk, and dance pop. In addition to incorporating sonic signs from this span of genres, Hall employs various types of speech as well as singing, exploiting the range of what Anthony Seeger called the "speech song continuum" (Seeger 1987).

Leslie Hall's popularity rose significantly over the course of five albums and as many tours (Hefty Hideaway n.d.). In addition to being known for her love of gem sweaters and "hip-hop" music, she has also come to be seen as a crafting aficionado, as many of her songs contain lyrics about crafting gem sweaters and scrapbooking. A good example of this is

“Craft Talk,” a music video in which Hall and the LYs build the world’s largest gem sweater, which I analyze in chapter two. Hall has also achieved gay icon status (Advocate 2007), as she has become known for her performances in queer bars and festivals and for having so many queer fans she began a gay marriage business.

Hall hasn’t released any videos on the lesliehall YouTube channel since 2014, nor has she toured with the LYs since that year. She has, however, performed at a few local events in various parts of Iowa, such as pride festivals, and a half-time show in collaboration with the Boone High School marching band. While Hall still maintains lightly active social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) under her Leslie and the LYs persona, her Instagram lists her as “kind of retired, kind of lazy, but always snacking.” Hall appears to be focusing her attention instead on her musical duo called Neon and Nude with Kate Kennedy, who is either Hall’s romantic partner or plays one on YouTube. They have released one video per year since 2014 on the Yarn House YouTube channel, wherein they sing songs about amusing elements of romantic relationships. These videos bear a few aesthetic similarities to the Leslie and the LYs videos (e.g., the neon colors and GarageBand production), but differ enough that they necessarily fall outside the scope of this project.

Intervention

This dissertation is highly interdisciplinary. In analyzing the bulk of Hall’s work, I discovered several common threads that resulted in a pile of puzzle pieces I attempt to fit together. Indeed, Hall’s work itself is interdisciplinary, combining the performance modes of amateur music video, live performance, and performance art. Semiotically, her art lies at the crossroad of fatness, monstrosity, queerness, Midwestern blue-collar whiteness, and the digital world. She calls attention to her size and sings about eating, performs at the limit

of human and monster, positions queerness in a cornfield, and enacts the ordinary internet celebrity narrative. This dissertation necessarily connects monstrosity, queer, fat, media, and Midwestern studies. My intervention is not only in connecting these fields, but also in bringing to light how they were always already connected in ways that were previously unseen.

Midwestern studies texts such as Cayton and Gray's *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (2001) and James Shortridge's *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989) discuss how the region is represented, largely agreeing that common tropes regarding the Midwest hold that it is plain, normal, and agrarian, despite the existence of multiple large urban centers such as Chicago and Detroit that are anything but. Shortridge and Cayton and Gray assert that these representations stem from the notion that the region is America's "heartland" and therefore continues to be stuck in a bucolic past. The "Destination Friendship Teaser" video I discussed at the beginning of this introduction connects to this past, playing with pioneer imagery, depicting a horse-drawn carriage as the mode of transportation as if to say that the Midwest is so old fashioned that its inhabitants do not even use cars. Especially given that Ford Motor is a Detroit company, this is clearly an exaggeration. To that end, many of the blue-collar white people that I grew up around in the suburbs of Detroit were far more ingrained in the industrialism of the region, working for Ford and other large manufacturers. Despite the reality of the Midwest's close relationship to industrialism, cornfields and other rural settings are commonly seen in depictions of the region, and as we saw in "Destination Friendship" and as we will see in chapters two and three, Hall plays with these depictions in order to point out how ridiculous they are.

I build upon the association of the Midwest with normativity, exploring the ways that Leslie Hall gives voice to Midwestern queerness, which is precluded both by the notion that the region is “normal” but also by queer neoliberalism, which positions coastal urban centers as the only locations possible for full execution of one’s queerness (Brown 2008). These discussions connect to social geography scholarship on non-urban or smaller urban queerness, which critiques the idea that queers belong in and identify solely with particular large coastal urban spaces, and sheds light on the queer communities and experiences that exist outside of such spaces. For example, Gavin Brown (2008) problematizes the hyperfocus on metropolitan homosexuality by queer geographers, stating that it is time for such scholars to “expand their horizons and move beyond this hierarchy of metropolitan gay centres, to study a broader range of sexualities and spaces in ‘ordinary cities’ assessed on their own terms” (Brown 2008: 1215). Similarly, Tiffany Myrdahl (2013) asserts that scholarly attention to queer geography is centered on the gay metropolis, and implicitly assumes the importance of a cosmopolitan ethos to the formation of queer identities. She states that this centrality structures “the possibilities of understanding LGBTQ lives and place-making outside of metropolitan centres recognised to be ‘gay friendly’” (Myrdahl 2013: 279).

This dissertation seeks to contribute to this project of considering non-urban queer identities and experiences by examining the ways in which Hall’s work centers Iowa and the “ordinary city” of Ames, simultaneously queering them, and non-urban or “ordinary” cities in general. Engaging with scholarship on the history of gay icons (Dyer 1986; Harris 1997; Clum 1999; Jennex 2013), I show that Hall’s work is a part of that history, but also offers it important interventions. For example, Richard Dyer contends that the contrast

between the ordinary and the glamorous and the teleology from one to the other offered a parallel to queer lives and contributed to the queer fascination with Judy Garland, whose girl-next-door film characters starkly contrasted the excess and turmoil of her personal life (1986). Hall's work, on the other hand, remains solidly and deliberately working class, avoiding classic Hollywood glamour in lieu of her queer homegrown Iowa glamour. Hall does not position the ordinary and the glamorous as mutually exclusive, but rather depicts them as existing alongside each other; her gold lamé and excessive drag-esque makeup grew up in a cornfield and are there to stay. Further, in examining Hall's camping of both plain femininity and DIY glamorous excess, I show that Hall's work not only allows for the Midwest and non-urban spaces more generally to be seen as queer, but also that it alters our notion of what "camp" is, given that camp is most often associated with feminine extravagance instead of ordinariness. In addition to engaging with scholarship on gay icons, this dissertation draws from queer ethnomusicology (DeVitt 2006) and musicology (Whitely 2006), as well as queer studies work on performance (Halberstam 1998; Muñoz 1999).

In addition to bringing queerness to the cornfield, I demonstrate how Hall troubles the notion of Midwestern normativity further in her utilization of monstrous aesthetics. I show that she refuses to position herself as wholly human, vocally and visually playing with the border between the human and the non-human. I utilize monstrosity studies, which examines this very border and how those that walk the line (i.e. liminal bodies) are positioned as "Other" and cause us to question the limits of what is considered human. For example, Stephen Asma (2009) states that the category of "monster" is mapped onto the outliers or Others of society—those seen as a threat to the natural or social order in any

given moment. I show that Hall particularly challenges this line between human and monster in her two music videos for the song “Zombie Killer,” in which she instructs viewers on how to take down zombies while overplaying her own grotesqueness. Similarly, in her most popular video, “Tight Pants / Body Rolls,” Hall positions herself as the biggest beast in the forest, again calling attention to her grotesqueness, and allowing the outline of the green screen around her to give her body an alien quality.

My consideration of Hall’s monstrosity is implicitly connected to my examination of the ways she uses her body and clothing to play up her size. I draw from fat studies, which discusses how fat bodies are constructed as unhealthy and excessive (Braziel and LeBesco 2001), as a failure at self-care and neoliberal individualism (Harjunen 2016), and as liminal and therefore monstrous in American society (Farrell 2011). Fat studies authors further show that, particularly post-9/11, fatness is seen as weakness and therefore renders American society vulnerable in the face of terrorism (Biltekoff 2007). The implication is that fatness is a threat to the safety of the nation state, an indication that the “obesity epidemic” has created a sub-human society.

I show that zombies provide a uniquely apt parallel to fatness, as both are viewed as excessive and between human and monster. At the same time, both zombies and fatness are ordinary in that they are commonplace. One rarely sees a lone zombie in a horror film, they are part of a mass of liminal bodies all turned by disease. Similarly, because of the narrative of the obesity epidemic, even though fatness is seen as excessive and monstrous, it is also normalized to some degree, as it is viewed as a widespread American issue.

In addition to being connected to monstrosity and liminality, zombies and fat bodies are also similar in that they serve as entertainment for the masses. Using scholarship on

American freak shows (Garland Thompson 1996), I show that the use of fat and monstrous bodies as entertainment is longstanding, as nineteenth century freak shows put fat bodies on display for the masses, and they were often the biggest crowd pleasers (Ostman 1996). In putting fat bodies on display in the context of “freakery,” audience members were both delighted and repulsed by such bodies, allowing them to confront and affirm their own humanness. Further, I demonstrate that, although the institution of freak shows as we knew them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has ended, the objectification of fatness and use of fatness for entertainment are still very much in effect with reality television shows such as *My 600 Pound Life* and *Biggest Loser* (Backstrom 2012). I argue that, in contrast, Leslie Hall throws her fatness in viewers’ faces. Through her tight clothing and jiggle-centric dancing, Hall challenges who is in charge of putting fat bodies on display and dismisses the common objectification of fat bodies in the media that focuses on attempts to reduce size and force fat people to take up less space. My work connects to other fat studies scholarship on fat performers (Mobley 2014; Rugseth and Engelsrud 2017), and also brings fat studies to ethnomusicology, where questions such as what the relationship of fatness is to music, what comprises the music of the fat acceptance movement, and what music fat people make remain largely unasked and unanswered.

Further, my analysis of Hall’s DIY music videos contributes to music video studies not only in that I analyze music videos that fall outside the mainstream industry, but also in that I bring analysis of music and lyrics to the table, which is significant in that studies of music video have often been housed in media studies and therefore focused on visual signs instead of musical ones (Railton and Watson 2011; Arnold 2017), with the exception of work by musicologists Carol Vernallis (2004; 2013) and Simon Frith (1993). In addition,

my attention to DIY music videos about the Midwest specifically demonstrates that music video can be ordinary and lack commercial gloss, which defies the genre's origins as advertisements for songs and musicians themselves (Vernallis 2004; Railton 2011; Arnold 2017). Finally, because Hall combines elements of futurity with quotidian Midwestern aesthetics, this dissertation shows that the Midwest and the future are not in opposition to each other, which unravels the ongoing societal notion that the region is stuck in the past.

This Is How We Go

Methodologically, this dissertation stitches together elements of multiple disciplines. My central method is music video analysis, which connects musicology and ethnomusicology with media and cultural studies. My readings of music videos discuss visual aesthetics such as staging, film and editing techniques, costumes, Midwestern cultural signifiers, and use of the body (dance, facial expression, gesticulations, etc.). I also study Hall's music in order to establish the types of aesthetics she creates in GarageBand to deepen the visual aesthetic of the music video at hand, such as a "folksy" aesthetic when situated in a rural backdrop. I analyze the timbre and range of Hall's singing, demonstrating how she utilizes specific sound qualities to support the overall aesthetic of the video (e.g., a ghostly timbre in a monstrous video), as well as how she defies the societal construction that femininity is expressed through higher registers (Cusick 1999).

These methods connect to those of other music video scholars, such as the authors Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg's edited collection *Sound and Vision: the Music Video Reader* (1993), which considers music video's position in the popular music industry and the social relations of production and consumption, as opposed to the film and communications perspective of pre-existing music video scholarship. The

authors focus on the connection between music and television and provide new ways of doing critical readings of specific music videos, avoiding overly simplistic analyses. For example, Savan's work on Madonna focuses on the ways that the artist's music is not empowering, in contrast to the common narrative of Madonna's work as liberatory (1993). Written over a decade before the invention of YouTube, this text lays the groundwork for thinking about music video and commercialism, which I have tried to do in a different way in this dissertation; as I will discuss in chapter one, YouTube is paradoxical and requires a nuanced discussion because it is simultaneously commercial yet reinforces a belief in its ordinariness and community orientation.

Other key texts in music video studies are those by Carol Vernallis, whose 2004 and 2013 texts examine the role of music video in contemporary society and develop methods for reading them. *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) responds to existing music video scholarship, developing new analytical methods and concepts. For example, while previous scholars debated whether music videos were narrative or anti-narrative, Vernallis asserts that music videos fall along a narrative to non-narrative continuum. Additionally, the author discusses each element of music videos in turn--editing, human figures, props, lyrics, and genre and ethnicity--and describes the relationships between them. Just as Vernallis applies her proposed methods to analyze music videos by Madonna, Prince, and Peter Gabriel, I, too, consider the relationships between these music video elements in Leslie Hall's work.

In *Unruly Media* (2013), Vernallis explains that certain types of audiovisual media such as YouTube have an inherently more social nature, as videos get passed along from person to person through various social media forums. As I will discuss further in chapter

one, Leslie Hall is a prime example of the social nature of YouTube, as that “community” ethos contributed to the virality of Hall’s videos and ultimately, her fame overall. *Unruly Media* was one of the first texts on music video to tend to the role of YouTube, while earlier texts on music video were more concerned with the rise and fall of MTV (Williams 2003; Marks and Tannenbaum 2011).

In addition to my study of Hall’s music videos, I also analyze a variety of texts, including YouTube comments, which I draw on to discuss audience reception, comparisons to other artists and their implications, as well as more general commentary on YouTube and its perceived community. I also scrutinize Hall’s lyrics and digital media such as interviews with Hall, podcasts and blog posts about her, and postings on Hall’s own social media accounts. While I initially intended to deepen my understandings of audience reception and Hall’s fandom through ethnography, I ultimately elected not to due to several factors. Firstly, when I reached out to Hall via email for an interview, she declined to respond. She also stopped touring around the time I began my research for this project, and has remained “kinda retired” since. I was thus unable to delve into fan behaviors or track down interviewees at live performances. Lastly, given that my discussion is about the way Hall’s fan base is constructed and imagined *online*, I opted to use internet comments and other forms of online media in order to assess that process.

This blend of research methods intends to perform what several queer studies scholars have referred to as a queer methodology, an amorphous method I have come to understand as being characterized by boundlessness. That is, although we train within the confines of disciplines, we live and are queer in a state of constant possibility. Therefore, it is important to draw not only from the methods and texts of our respective disciplines, but

also from whatever is useful and relevant to construct the stories we tell. Hence, while I am training as an ethnomusicologist, I am aware that musical subjects do not only live as musical subjects. Television, music video, journalism, oppression, sex, and other intimacies are all a part of the lives of musical subjects and therefore cannot be dismissed as “irrelevant” or “unmusical.”

Several queer scholars have exemplified this type of open methodology for me. For instance, in *The Feeling of Kinship* (2010), David Eng utilizes queer diasporas as an analytical and methodological lens. Within his text, he draws from multiple bodies of knowledge, such as novels, films, and case histories, and states that queer diasporas is “a critical methodology, a reading practice that responds to queer liberalism and its racialization of intimacy by imagining otherwise, and by providing alternative knowledges and possibilities” (Eng 2010: 13). By utilizing multiple types of knowledges and reading them through the lens of queer diasporas, Eng is able to queer the bounds of discipline and offer stories and affective meanings that have otherwise been invisible in academic work and conceptions of diaspora.

Similarly, in *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar “engages a range of different theoretical paradigms, textual materials, and tactical approaches that are reflective of a queer methodological philosophy” (Puar 2007, xv). Puar blurs disciplinary boundaries, reading governmental texts alongside pop-cultural ones such as the television show *South Park*. Puar and Eng demonstrate the need for incorporating multiple types of methods and texts in order to tell a more nuanced story of the topic at hand. Hence, queer methodologies can look many ways, and what is important is not the restriction of discipline, but rather the consideration of which texts and methods are relevant and revealing. By mingling

methods from ethnomusicology and media and cultural studies to analyze television, film, music video, and other online media, this dissertation is better equipped to analyze a greater magnitude of Hall's influences and significances. Through this project, I add a discourse analysis of internet texts as well as musical semiotics to the conversation of what a queer methodology can be and include.

Signifi-cat

While scholars of music have certainly begun to utilize the internet as a tool for research and teaching (Rudolph 2009; Biamonte 2010) as well as an extension or representation of particular cultures (Caroso 2014; Eun-Young 2014), what has yet to be considered by music scholars is not only that musical cultures take place and are produced online, but that "the internet" itself is perceived as a culture. Just as in "real life," cultural and commercial exchanges take place online, allowing a platform for fame that differs from others such as television or film, as it is user-driven even as it becomes increasingly commercialized. Unlike television and film, virtual technology has become such an integrated part of life for many in the 21st century that it has become ordinary and quotidian. Indeed, people engage with virtual technology on their mobile phones in such mundane settings as public transit, at work, or even on the toilet. As such, "the internet" is made up of ordinary people doing quotidian things, yet this quotidianness is not separated from the commercial or the virtual. This is particularly true with YouTube, where one can easily view videos with celebrities as famous as Oprah in the same two-minute span as some unknown, bored Midwestern teenager attempting to replicate the work of their favorite celebrity, or two siblings recording their drunk parents to embarrass them later. By heavily integrating virtual worlds into everyday life and using YouTube to depict

interactions that would typically be private and ephemeral, the notion of a public and private dichotomy is blurred to a degree that it barely even exists at all. It is my deep look into YouTube--or more generally, internet--culture using Leslie Hall as a lens that brings internet culture itself to ethnomusicology.

In addition to bringing ethnomusicological attention to internet culture, this dissertation is also significant in that it gives scholarly attention to the surprisingly underexplored concept of the internet celebrity. Although colloquially people talk about using the internet to become famous and now entire professions exist to assist with attaining fame online, I only discovered one book on the topic of internet celebrity, and it was *How to Make Your Cat an Internet Celebrity* (Carlin 2014), an allegedly “indispensable resource [that] shows how ordinary housecats can follow in the venerable pawprints of the Internet’s brightest stars.” While the notion that pets can become internet celebrities is interesting in itself and again speaks to the idea that the internet can make someone as seemingly private and quotidian as a house pet famous, by the time of writing enough humans have become internet celebrities that it is odd the topic has yet to receive much scholarly attention, but that’s what I’m here for. My attention to Leslie Hall’s work and online fame not only sheds light on one internet celebrity’s career, but provides a brief history and considers the concept more generally, as Hall became famous at a time when internet celebrity itself was really new. Hence, this work seeks to begin laying the groundwork for future academic attention to fame achieved online. For example, one could consider looking at internet use and celebrity by country, as national media and laws surrounding it would likely affect who can use the internet and use it to become famous. One could also explore who has access to the internet and what infrastructure exists to

support the internet, as well as the effects of cultural conventions in general. For instance, how a culture relates to animals will likely have a bearing on which animals, if any, achieve iconic status on the internet.

Chapter Outline

To show how Hall's work disrupts Midwest stereotypes, in chapter one I demonstrate that her performance of Midwesternness was appealing to internet culture. Drawing from Michael Strangelove (2010), I discuss the way YouTube brought quotidian private life into the public eye, and out of this shift from private to public arose a new wave of entertainment focused on the ordinary and the ordinarily weird. Hence, the idea that music videos could portray cornfields and mundane hobbies like scrapbooking made fun of the extreme Hollywood flash of mainstream music videos. Indeed, Hall's Midwest trash connected to the narrative that any ordinary person could become famous on YouTube. One's work did not need to be conventionally "good" to be popular, which gave many hope of becoming an internet celebrity.

Tracing the trajectory of Hall's online fame, I show how her work exemplified this notion that one not need be good to be famous. For example, that which instigated her fame--her 2005 "Gallery of Glamore"—was simply a lot of photos of Hall, a fat white woman, posing in the same way with the same deadpan face and wearing the same pants. Her modeling was not good and was nowhere near conventional, but the internet ate it up not *in spite of* how bad it was, but *because of* how bad it was.

In addition to Hall's gem sweater gallery, I also examine the virality of some of her YouTube videos, as well as her use of YouTube as a platform through which to contribute to the imagined YouTube community. I demonstrate how Hall's engagement with that

community is mutual in that fans have created versions of her videos, especially “Tight Pants / Body Rolls,” and have also used film and aesthetic techniques common in Hall’s work to create music videos for which there were none. Further, I analyze the comments made by contemporary YouTube stars in the “YouTubers React to ‘Tight Pants / Body Rolls’” video to show that because of Hall’s early online fame, she is significant to the history and concept of internet celebrity in general.

Chapter two discusses the ways the Midwest is perceived and portrayed in the popular imaginary (including television and film) as predominantly rural, stuck in the past, and uninteresting, as shown in phrases such as “flyover states” or “middle of nowhere” that are commonly used in describing the Midwest. Using regional studies scholarship, I analyze the imagery and music of Hall’s “Gravel in My Shoe.” I show that Hall plays on this conception of the Midwest as boring and normal by camping plain white femininity and rurality. I discuss the storyline of “Gravel,” in which Hall and the LYs play similarly dressed Midwestern housewives, their husbands all played by the same actor. In dressing similarly and having essentially the “same” husband, Hall camps stereotypical Midwestern heteronormativity in order to make a joke of it.

In addition to camping plain Midwest femininity, I demonstrate that Hall also plays on the notion that Midwesterners have poor taste, backwards fashion, and do not understand what is conventionally considered “tacky.” I explore how Hall dramatizes the importance and fashionability of old objects such as gem sweaters and beanie babies. I assert that Hall’s glorification of the gem sweater revalues forgotten and failed femininity, making the gem sweater a metaphor for this Midwestern femininity she camps.

Chapter three provides an historical overview of diva worship in the gay community, and situates Hall as part of that lineage. I utilize social geography to show how queerness has come to be associated with coastal urbanity; New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco in particular are positioned as *the* queer places to live, leaving behind queer experiences that happen elsewhere, especially those of rural areas. Analyzing “How We Go Out” and “Your [sic] Not Taken,” I contend that Hall’s work juxtaposes flashy queerness with rurality/small-townness (e.g., gold lamé in a corn field), giving voice to the Midwestern queer experience. Further, I analyze the documentary “Married in Spandex,” which depicts Hall officiating the wedding of a lesbian couple in a low-budget and extremely DIY setting. In examining the reactions of the brides’ parents to the fact that they have to help clean and decorate the wedding venue, as well as to the nature of the wedding itself, it becomes clear that Hall makes a mockery of the institution of marriage. I compare this DIY wedding with the mass wedding that occurred at the 2014 Grammys, which featured multiple mainstream gay icons and a number of gay couples. This comparison helps me to argue that while Hall connects to the history and present of mainstream gay iconicity, she also disrupts the diva worship concept by being low-budget and DIY.

Finally, chapter four discusses the emphasis on monstrosity in much of Hall’s work. I draw from texts on societal constructions of monstrosity and the role such constructions play in defining humanness and normativity. I also utilize fat studies to establish that fatness is seen as monstrous in U.S. culture and examine the longstanding use of fat bodies as entertainment in American culture in order to establish the significance of agency in fat entertainers such as Leslie Hall. I show that societal panic about obesity was particularly high in the post-9/11 context, as popular rhetoric positioned fat bodies as vulnerable in the

face of terrorism; the obesity epidemic was seen to be weakening the power of the U.S. nation. I argue that instead of using monstrosity to shame, invisibilize, and frame fat people as vulnerable, Hall uses monstrosity to celebrate the fat body, which she does explicitly and often in her work. I analyze “Blame the Booty” and “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” as examples of that celebration.

In addition to celebrating her own fat monstrosity, I show how Hall’s work also concretely connects to the horror genre, particularly in her depictions of zombies in the “Zombie Killer” and “Zombie Killer Revisited” music videos. I explore the relationship between Hall and the zombies in the videos, wherein she positions herself as their celebrity (i.e. the zombies are Hall’s audience members) but also their killer. I demonstrate that, by using extremely maniacal facial expressions and becoming increasingly disheveled throughout the videos, Hall refuses to portray herself as fully human vis-à-vis the zombies. At the same time, in being the “zombie killer” and escaping the reach of the zombies, Hall shows that she is not powerless in the apocalypse.

Presenting Another Midwest Diva: Me

Having been steeped in feminist methods that critique the notion of researcher objectivity and support the discussion of author positionality (Wekker 2006; Hayes 2010), I would be remiss if I avoided discussing my own. While I did not seek to be a scholar of Midwestern queer femininity when I began graduate school, it somehow ended up that way. This topic is deeply related to my own subjectivity as a queer femme who was raised in Michigan and therefore grew up saturated in Midwestern culture, which I did not see as having qualities of “culture” at the time.

This dissertation discusses the need to represent Midwestern and non-urban queer experiences not only because they exist but also because not doing so erases those experiences and communities. When I moved to Seattle, Washington for graduate school in 2009, I did so not only because I wanted to further my education but also because I wanted to move somewhere liberal, and therefore reasonably concluded that a coastal urban center was a good destination. And I have to say, I was not wrong that in the end, I do feel more comfortable in a city that not only leaned left but where I could reside in a neighborhood notoriously considered the “gayborhood” (i.e. Capitol Hill). At the same time, that comfort could simply be due to seeing more queer people around than the attitude of the city in general. Liberalism easily operates as a gloss that erases the homophobia that still exists in places deemed “liberal,” and a white liberal city certainly does not mean everyone is equal or included in general. Further, I now find it ultimately problematic to think that queers only belong in certain places even if those places have a concentration of queer people, and even if I personally am more comfortable in such a space. It is also a classist notion to associate queerness with urbanity, as not everyone can afford to move or live in a coastal city, and such cities as Seattle, San Francisco, and New York are increasingly financially inaccessible to many.

In terms of my interest in Leslie Hall specifically, that too was an accident. As mentioned, I did not seek to research a specific topic when I began graduate school; I simply knew ethnomusicology was a suitable field as it allowed me to research queer and feminist music in general. I was initially shown Leslie Hall videos in 2012 or 2013 by some friends who were also living in Seattle but originally from the Midwest. Over time, and as I became more interested in fatness and the body more generally, I looked to Leslie Hall as

someone who employed her fat body in a deliberate way and often performed at queer bars and therefore clearly had some kind of queer following. Upon further viewing her videos, I realized that her work really fit the fields to which I was already drawn (e.g., ethnomusicology, queer and feminist studies) and many more, such as media, monstrosity, and Midwestern studies, which I initially thought nothing about. The more I watched Hall's videos, the more I realized that her "weirdness" was inherently political in many ways--intentionally or not. It was all of these accidents or happenstances--my relocation to Seattle, my discovery of Hall, and even Hall's fame itself--that created the circumstances out of which this dissertation arose, and it is undeniable that my subjectivity as a queer femme from the Midwest has influenced the direction of the analyses found in this work.

*"My destiny was revealed when the internet was born. I was born."
-Leslie Hall, VH1's "The Greatest"*

Chapter One. Ordinary Celebrity and The Internet's Biggest Fan

This chapter explores the significance of YouTube in Leslie Hall's work, and in particular the ways that it provided an imagined community in love with the quotidian, which in turn allowed Hall's weird, ordinary, Midwest camp to become popular. I begin with a brief history of YouTube and an overview of Hall's history of participation on the site. I establish that, though Hall's internet stardom did not begin on YouTube, the site intensified her fame by providing a platform for viral moments, not only due to the site's perceived purpose as a repository for amateur videos, but also because of its cultural appreciation for "the weird."

In addition to my discussion of YouTube's significance to Hall, I also consider her significance to it. To do so, I analyze the "YouTubers React to Tight Pants / Body Rolls" video, wherein a cast of current YouTube celebrities watches Hall's most viral video and responds. I contend that, as these discussions between YouTubers demonstrate, Hall is seen as an integral part of the history of the YouTube celebrity concept and therefore an important part of YouTube's community. Moreover, I show that Hall deliberately positions herself as part of this perceived community in multiple ways. Firstly, in reading her video "We Are the Web," an early music video made in support of net neutrality, I show that Hall considers everyone, including herself, to be part of the internet. Secondly, in analyzing fan versions of Hall's music videos and how Hall responds to those fans, I demonstrate that Hall attempts to build relationships with her fans. In analyzing Hall's own fan video for the

movie “Willow,” I assert that she blurs the lines between celebrity and fan, which makes her more relatable to the imagined YouTube community.

In addition to Hall’s significance to YouTube and its imagined community, I also explore the ways that Hall both fits into and performs the commonly held notion that any ordinary person can become famous, and provide historical context for the popularity of that narrative at the time Hall was becoming an internet celebrity. I discuss how Hall parodies the work of mainstream celebrities, examining how her album “Door Man’s Daughter” parodies “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” the biography and biopic of Loretta Lynn--another singer from very “ordinary” origins that became a celebrity. Further, I show that Hall not only sees herself as a celebrity but exaggerates it in performance. I suggest that Hall’s exaggerated performance of celebrity points back to her ordinariness instead of or perhaps in addition to amplifying her celebrityhood, as her over-the-top performance of celebrity tells the story of ordinary person-turned-celebrity who does not know how to handle their newfound fame.

YouTube: A History

YouTube was founded in 2005 by three PayPal employees with the hope of creating a video hosting platform. One of the site’s creators posted the first video on April 23, 2005 (Kless 2013), and YouTube easily became the fastest growing site at the time, with traffic increasing 297% within the first six months of 2006 (O’Malley 2006). Even from YouTube’s first video--a mere eighteen-second recording of an experience at the zoo--the site created space for videos that captured quotidian experiences, focusing the audience’s attention not on glossy Hollywood films or music videos by mainstream artists and producers, but on

everyday experiences by ordinary people. Despite undergoing many changes, YouTube is still considered one of the primary destinations for amateur videos (Strangelove 2010: 22).

Although having an online platform through which to share quotidian content was somewhat new at the outset of YouTube's existence, the desire to create amateur videos was not. Michael Strangelove asserts that YouTube's popularity and content is rooted in the legacy of the home videos of the baby boomer generation, which he describes as "the old home movies our parents and grandparents made on 8mm and 16mm film cameras" (Ibid: 17). In addition to home videos played at home and for neighbors, shows such as *America's Funniest Home Videos* (AFHV)--a primetime ABC show beginning in 1989 that plays humorous home videos in which physical accidents typically occur--demonstrate that there is both precedence for and large enough interest in amateur videos of everyday experiences. Further creating preference for interest and participation in YouTube was the fact that winners of AFHV were decided by vote, making it customary that audience members participate in the show.

As Strangelove and AFHV demonstrate, there is a decades-long history of creating and, to some degree, watching and even rating home videos. The reach of these videos only went so far, and who could create them was strongly connected to age and financial resources. In contrast, YouTube enabled a shift in who could make videos as well as who could view them. Historically, home videos were mostly created by adult family members and typically viewed only by others close to them such as other family members and neighbors, excepting rare cases after 1989 in which people submitted home videos to and were selected for viewing by AFHV. Because of the wide reach of smartphone technology and the significantly increased financial accessibility of video recording equipment, now

anyone of almost any age in basically any location can create amateur video, barring cases of significant geographic or financial limitations. With YouTube, users of all ages can create, share, and view amateur videos.

Not only has YouTube created greater reach for and access to amateur videos, but it has also encouraged the types of content found in home or amateur video to be vaster. While traditional home videos had particular conventions for behavior, decorum, and the types of scenes captured on film, YouTube permitted a significant loosening of those conventions. Indeed, the site hosts videos that would not have previously been seen or probably even created, and the videos themselves comprise scenarios and locations that would previously have been considered too private for broad viewership—if they would have been considered for viewership at all. For example, Strangelove discusses how previously unrecorded or circulated videos that depict arguments between family members, physical fights among friends, or even the antics of drunk parents (Ibid: 48) are now available for the public to see. Thus, the breadth of topics and situations found in YouTube videos marks a societal shift to a much blurrier divide between private and public. Because situations previously deemed too private for home video are now captured on film and uploaded for public internet viewership, the private has now become public.

YouTube also extends the reach of both public and private spheres to a global viewership. That is, YouTube is accessible by anyone with an internet connection across the globe, with the exception of Turkey, Eritrea, Pakistan, Iran, China, and North Korea, all of which have blocked the site (Liebelson 2014). Due to YouTube's amplitude, viewers can now watch what would have previously been private situations--not necessarily because the situations are salacious, but rather because of their everydayness and amateurity—

most places in the world. Hence, because of the way the private has become public through YouTube, private homes in one location become a part of private homes in another, and these homes span different cultures that define private and public differently as well.

YouTube's extensive reach is no accident, as the site itself frames its ability to distribute videos globally as one of its main selling points. Previously, its "About" section stated, "YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe, and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small" (YouTube, Accessed July 27, 2016). Global reach aside, the language of the "About" section also somewhat romantically hinted at the major way the site is paradoxical--it hosts videos for content creators and advertisers of various sizes. This language shows that, though the number of amateur videos significantly outweighs commercial content, YouTube is not solely dedicated to amateur video but instead considers itself a site for anyone, a neutral "forum." Many YouTube users, on the other hand, do not seem to consider the site a neutral forum, but instead imagine themselves to be part of an online community of amateur video makers and audience members (and often both). This imagined community perceives the site's purpose to be to provide a unique platform for hosting non-mainstream media.

Strangelove writes of this conception, "Members see YouTube as a space for amateur use only (even though it obviously is not)" (Strangelove: 112). As an example, the author discusses how, when Oprah (or more realistically, her media team) posted her first video on YouTube, many users responded with disappointment that a mainstream celebrity was now using the site to display content, as they felt it disrupted the amateur community and made it more difficult for amateurs to become popular. One such user

stated, “Youtube is for people who AREN’T already on television. Give someone ELSE a chance” (Ibid.). According to Strangelove, this discussion about YouTube’s purpose is ongoing, as some YouTube users embrace the presence of mainstream celebrities and their representative big media companies, while others continue to consider the presence of celebrities and corporations as “the end of a golden age of YouTube” (Ibid: 111)

As evidenced by this ongoing debate and the way amateur and corporate videos are forced to coexist on the same site, it is clear that YouTube occupies a paradoxical space, a veritable battleground upon which a Do-It-Yourself community ethos dukes it out with mainstream media. The mainstream media and the DIY video community only mixed further as mainstream media began to pick up on the role of YouTube in the popularization of contemporary stars. “Recording labels and talent scouts increasingly turn[ed] their attention to online publishing opportunities,” which in turn codified the conception of YouTube “as literally a way to ‘broadcast yourself’ into fame and fortune” (Burgess and Green 2009: 22). So at the same time that part of YouTube’s appeal was the quotidian nature of its amateur videos, it also became mythologized as a means through which ordinary users could become famous. Burgess and Green write that “the promise that talented but undiscovered YouTubers can make the leap from their ‘ordinary worlds’ to the bona fide ‘media world’ is firmly embedded in YouTube itself, evident in a number of YouTube’s talent discovery competitions and initiatives” (23). Hence, both the imagined amateur community of YouTube and big media played a part in constructing this narrative that the site was a new means for discovering and being discovered.

While it would be easy to argue that the presence of a hosting site for amateur videos marks a significant shift in the power dynamics between ordinary people and big

media, it is more accurate to say that the site sustains mass media's power by creating another place for regular people to become a part of the mainstream's existing structures. Graeme Turner (2010) writes about this in *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. Turner asserts that the increased representation of ordinary people does not transfer media power democratically but rather demotically, as this ordinary celebrity still remains controlled by mass media (Turner 2010: 17).

Milly Williamson (2016) also critiques the notion that social media in general (of which YouTube is a part) democratizes media and truly allows any ordinary person to become famous. She roots this cultural obsession with celebrification of ordinary people in the push by big media to portray regular people, which was instigated as a cost cutting measure. This trend toward representing the ordinary first motivated the dawn of reality television in the 1990s; creating shows that provided audiences with images of ordinary people allowed television to still have the allure of celebrity but did not require celebrity salary (Williamson 2016: 110). Williamson shows that reality television laid the groundwork for the narrative that media has become more democratic. She writes:

The visibility of ordinary people, and their associated 'celebrification', is considered to be advancing the processes of democracy not only in television culture but more widely; it is seen as a consumer-led form of participatory democracy as digital and online voting brings viewers into the decision-making process (100).

Williamson also discusses how social media continued this "democratainment" narrative. With social media, users had even greater access to celebrification, as such media requires everyone to construct their image as "micro-celebrities," and allows users to believe that they are not restricted by any gatekeepers, in contrast to the gatekeepers of reality television, who could not be invisibilized as big networks still controlled those television shows.

This seeming lack of gatekeepers allowed for the line between production and consumption to become blurry, as social media essentially requires us to construct our image at the same time as we consume the images others construct of themselves. As Williamson writes:

Because of the accessible character of social media, and the ease with which users can produce images and text, social media is seen to significantly undermine or complicate the distinction between production and consumption as users take greater control of the process of celebrification (130).

While social media is indeed accessible to most, Williamson also states that many who gain social capital on the internet already have the resources to use social media in such a way that allows them to easily gain fame (she uses blogger Perez Hilton as an example [Ibid.]). Yet, despite both the presence of mainstream celebrities (e.g., Oprah) and the influence of big media on internet celebrification, narratives surrounding social media technologies continue to claim that it creates a more democratic landscape for celebrification and even liberation. Williamson speaks to this end:

Despite the ubiquity and dominance of 'old media' celebrity online...discussions of digital technology continue to be accompanied by claims about its momentous potential in the service of liberation, to offer new, more equitable forms of human interaction and modes of the self (133).

Hence, while big media and the internet become basically inseparable, many hold fast to the notion that social media and the internet more generally provide a platform for freedom of expression and interaction.

Indeed, this narrative about the internet and freedom is circulated so heavily that now the notion for which YouTube users fought as discussed earlier (i.e. that the site's purpose is for democratically distributing and viewing amateur content only) has become the narrative with which YouTube basically brands itself. For example, while the "About"

section of YouTube was focused on its global reach and neutrality of forum, now it takes these notions even further. Currently, the “About” section, which has become far more extensive, states that YouTube’s mission is “to give everyone a voice and show them the world.” Lower on the page, it says: “Our values are based on four essential freedoms that define who we are,” listing the four as the “freedom of expression,” “freedom of information,” “freedom of opportunity,” and “freedom to belong.”

In the middle of this page about YouTube’s mission of giving everyone a voice and providing them with freedoms, there is a video regarding YouTube’s “Brand Mission,” which exemplifies YouTube’s supposed focus on global humanity and freedom. The voiceover says: “Look at these moments, all of these stories, secrets, revelations from every corner of the world. Every video a chance to walk in someone else’s shoes” (YouTube, Accessed 29 March 2018). This rhetoric is focused not only on the global reach of YouTube, but frames the global reach as an opportunity to experience another person’s private (turned public) life, and imagines a community based on neutral and mutual global relatability.

The voiceover in the “Brand Mission” video continues to describe YouTube as a neutral space in which the vastness of humanity can be explored. It says that YouTube is:

A reminder of how amazingly generous people are. How hilariously funny and heartbreakingly vulnerable humans can be. This is the rawest, purest, most unfiltered portrait of who we are as people. A celebration of what humans can do. Proof of our potential. A motor for our progress. This is what happens when you give everyone a voice. A chance to be heard. And a stage to be seen.

This quote positions YouTube as having space for “everyone” and as a means of measuring the progress of “humanity,” broadly and globally defined, yet individualistic at the same time.

The next part of the “Brand Mission” video further reifies the original narrative that the site is a place for users to broadcast themselves, a place for ordinary people to become famous. It says: “Whatever your thing is...well, here, it can become the next big thing. That person who thought they were no one, they can become someone.” Here, YouTube brands itself as having a market for everything and everyone, no matter what “your thing is.” The flurry of amateur videos over which this narrative is spoken, which features people of various races, genders, and ethnicities in a wide array of settings, attempts to portray YouTube’s point that the site is for literally everyone everywhere. They finish the video by again driving home that point, and positioning YouTube as not only as a community of users, but as a family: “Even when you felt all alone in the world, it’s here you can find someone just like you. This is what family’s about right here. That’s the power of YouTube. That’s the power of you. All of you.”

What YouTube’s “Brand Mission” truly demonstrates is that the narratives of freedom and ordinary celebrification circulated so long and so extensively that YouTube took that notion and sold it back to its community. Judging by the comments, which are largely negative and even accuse YouTube of being more filtered than not (in contrast to its “unfiltered” rhetoric), users see right through that strategy. But at the time when Leslie Hall was utilizing YouTube to achieve and broaden her fame between 2005 and 2014, many users, including her, strongly believed in the site’s role as a place for any ordinary person to become famous. As we will see, Hall’s work exemplifies this narrative, and she worked to uphold and even perform it as well.

Leslie Hall's Fame

In terms of her internet fame, Leslie Hall did not initially become famous as a YouTube celebrity or a musician, but her music videos ended up playing a very significant role in her garnering of more widespread community of fans. Hall initially started posting music videos in 2004 while she was attending the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Her first videos were distributed on BeatGreetings.com, a musical greeting card website that predated YouTube and has since ceased to exist, and on which Hall was the first unsigned artist to be featured (Andres 2009). Because the site no longer exists, it is unclear which videos were posted.

Hall began posting videos on YouTube on April 27, 2006, just a year after the site's creation. She initially posted two videos: a recording of her appearance on "Chic-a-go-go" (lesliehall 2006), a public access television show for kids that began in 1996 (Facebook n.d.), and a promotional video for the Gem Sweater Museum, which was displayed in Boston at the time (lesliehall 2006). In 2006, Hall also filmed the first of her two episodes of "Ring My Bell." "Ring My Bell" was originally a 1990s UK show wherein a celebrity sits at a desk in front of a minimal background, answering calls from the television audience. The show was remade for the Web in 2006, and Hall posted her episodes on YouTube in 2007 and 2008 (in opposite order, oddly enough). In Leslie's episodes, she talks to callers while snacking and toying with a variety of random objects on the desk such as Beanie Babies or light-up dinosaur figurines. Her discussions comment on relevant issues such as gem sweaters, internet stardom, food, and Midwest culture. These videos affirm Hall's celebrityhood, as being a celebrity is the requirement for being on the show, and also

because in theory, nobody would watch just any old ordinary person answer calls for any length of time.

In addition to the recognition of Leslie's celebrityhood through her appearance on "Ring My Bell," she also joined the ranks with two other somewhat obscure internet celebrities to make a music video about net neutrality called "We Are the Web" for the website WeAreTheWeb.org, which is no longer in use. Although it is unclear whether Hall instigated the creation of this video, it is significant that she appears alongside Tron Guy, a fat middle-aged Midwestern computer programmer named Jay Maynard who is known for creating a tight-fitting electroluminescent Tron costume and uploading a series of photos of himself posing in the suit (similar to Leslie's "Gallery of Glamore") in 2004. The third internet celebrity featured in "We Are the Web" is Randy Constan, a Peter Pan impersonator from Tampa, Florida who is best known for posting cosplay pictures of himself to his site pixyland.org in order to find a girlfriend (Constan n.d.). I will discuss "We Are The Web" at greater length later in this chapter as part of my discussion of how Hall sees herself as part of not just internet celebrity, but the imagined internet community as well.

The then music-oriented channel VH1 further solidified Hall's internet celebrityhood in 2007 by ranking her number twenty on the channel's list of "40 Greatest Internet Superstars." This list uses the music video for "Gem Sweater" as its example, and describes Leslie as the "Keeper of the gems [who] turned her love of glittery sweaters into internet stardom," which exemplifies the YouTube brand mission video's rhetoric that "whatever your thing is, it could be the next big thing," as here VH1 asserts that Hall turned her love of gem sweaters into stardom (VH1 2007). Others that appeared on VH1's list

included equally obscure internet celebrities such as Jay Maynard (#15), as well as those who rose to much higher levels of fame such as the blogger Perez Hilton (#6) and eventual Saturday Night Live cast member Andy Samberg (#16). In addition to Hall's VH1 mention, in April 2007 she also appeared on Total Request Live (TRL), the daily MTV show that counted down the ten most popular music videos based on audience votes. In being featured by mainstream music media outlets VH1 and MTV, Hall's celebrityhood was endorsed not only by the internet (then perceived as being separate from mainstream media), but by big media as well.

The year 2008 was more active for Leslie Hall on YouTube; she posted the music videos for "How We Go Out Version 2" and two versions of "Zombie Killer (feat. Elvira)." In addition to her own videos, Leslie Hall participated in a video released by the web browser Mozilla Firefox called "Firefox Users Against Boredom," which featured many YouTube celebrities, most of them now unknown. The "Users Against Boredom" video parodies the 1985 "We Are the World" music video, which featured a supergroup of celebrities (e.g., Cyndi Lauper, Michael Jackson, Tina Turner) who comprised the charity group United Support of Artists for Africa (USA for Africa). The "We Are the World" video depicts celebrities grouped around microphones, and was created to raise money to contribute to famine relief in Africa. In contrast, the Firefox parody of "We Are the World" was not created for altruistic means, but rather as a "campaign against boredom," which was actually an advertising campaign with the mission of positioning Firefox as far superior to Internet Explorer. The video deliberately falsifies statistics about the users of each browser (e.g., "Compared to Internet Explorer users, Firefox users are 66% more likely to have

viewed or listened to audio or video about politics or public affairs news within the last 30 days”) (TechCrunch 2008).

While most of the “celebrities” featured in the Firefox campaign video are wearing plain clothes and behaving in fairly straightforward ways, Leslie asserts her celebrity by maintaining the exaggerated persona that has made her famous—she wears a tight-fitting gold outfit, her standard blue eye makeup and hugely coiffed hair, and sings in an over-the-top fashion that draws viewer attention to her over others. In further performance of celebrity, at the start of the video Hall is shown getting out of the car as if she were a mainstream celebrity arriving to a red carpet event. Her commitment to performing celebrityhood only enhances the level of parody this video embodies. That is, the format of the video is not the only aspect that makes it a parody on “We Are the World,” as Leslie’s performance in the video alone parodies the mainstream celebrityhood of the USA for Africa supergroup.

In 2009, Hall uploaded another video to YouTube that positioned her as celebrity in a similar way to the “Ring My Bell” episodes. Hall’s episode of “What’s In My Bag,” a show created by Amoeba Music that features “artists and tastemakers sharing what they found shopping at Amoeba” (Amoeba Music n.d.), depicts her slouching on a couch and discussing her love of Cheez-Its and various films, such as “Troop Beverly Hills,” and Shania Twain’s *Greatest Hits* album (2004), which she sings snippets of in a deliberately off-key manner. This video truly captures what it means to be an “ordinary celebrity” in that her celebrity is affirmed by the show simply being of Hall talking about things she found at Amoeba that she likes, but her ordinariness is also affirmed in that she discusses quotidian practices such as Cheez-It eating, in her off-key singing of a mainstream celebrity’s work, and in her

positioning herself as a fan of particular movies and artists. In addition, “What’s In My Bag” parodies other types of very quotidian content such as infomercials, when Hall states that on the rare occasion when she wants to do a cardio exercise, she listens to a remix album called *Work This! Reloaded* (2006). As she says this, we see a close-up of the album spinning slowly in a circle with a price tag in the upper left corner of the screen, just as on an infomercial. This video foretells several future discussions in this dissertation, as Hall’s positioning herself as both fan and celebrity exemplifies the way she fits into the imagined community of YouTube, and the infomercial style (Figure 3) recalls images of the Midwestern housewife Hall camps (discussed in the next chapter).



Figure 3: Screenshot from Leslie Hall’s episode of “What’s in My Bag” on YouTube, which has an infomercial feel to it. The remix album “Work This! Reloaded” is one of many forgotten forms of media Hall advertises in the video.

Leslie Hall and the YouTube Community

As previously mentioned, although Hall did not initially attain fame on YouTube, the site was very significant in increasing and maintaining her celebrity status. What’s more, Hall is significant to YouTube in that she is looked to as one of the original YouTube celebrities, a relic from an earlier time when YouTube videos were often amateur and

looked that way (as opposed to the present, when even smartphone cameras can pass for professional). Hall's relic status is discussed in the "YouTubers React to Tight Pants / Body Rolls" video, wherein a cast of current YouTube celebrities views Hall's most viral video, "Tight Pants / Body Rolls," and respond to it, giving impressions of the video. After the cast views and responds to the video, the show's host relays Hall's history of gem sweater collecting and music video making. Most of the YouTubers had never heard of Hall, but TayZonday, who was also in the "Firefox Users Against Boredom," appears shocked and appalled by his co-stars' lack of knowledge. He states, "I think Leslie Hall is just a part of history, certainly the part of the history of everyone who has been in this video," after which the "YouTubers React" host begins to show the YouTubers photos from Hall's online gem sweater gallery.

Upon his doing so, the YouTubers begin to realize that "Tight Pants / Body Rolls" and Leslie Hall are a part of the history of internet celebrity itself. The host says, "since she was one of these early Internet celebrities, she started doing things, like she was on TRL on MTV way back when, she sang with Yo Gabba Gabba once...she started a band and she made satirical rap music videos like this." In response, Vsauce3's Michael Stevens says, "I feel like I should know who she is now." The host continues to describe the significance of Hall to the internet celebrity concept, stating "and so she was doing these kinds of things long before a lot of people online were doing them. She was one of the first ones. Yet, you don't even know who she is," to which iHasCupquake responds by saying, "No, and I live on the internet!" The conversation in the "YouTubers React" video then develops into a discussion among the YouTubers about the way that internet celebrityhood waxes and wanes. "I've seen people come and I've seen people go, and I've seen people come back," says Tyler

Oakley, a very popular gay YouTube star who makes videos about “his favorite things: music, style and pop culture.”

TayZonday, who attained internet celebrityhood around the same time that Hall did, reflects on the changes that internet celebrityhood has undergone over the years, stating: “Being popular online was smaller at that time than it is now. You could have global success and it was still a small constrained thing.” Here, TayZonday brings up a key point about the ways that becoming a celebrity online has changed. Although Hall was fairly well known when she was becoming famous in the mid-to-late 2000s, internet celebrities were widely known but did not obtain as longstanding or capitalistically successful fame as many contemporary internet celebrities do. For example, several of the YouTube stars in the “React” video have careers that starkly contrast to those of Leslie Hall and other early internet celebrities. For example, Tyler Oakley’s YouTube channel has over eight million subscribers and Jenna Marbles, the most followed female YouTube celebrity, has over sixteen million subscribers. Both Oakley and Marbles are multi-millionaires. By contrast, Hall has about 116,000 followers and gives no indications of being wealthy.

She is the Web

In addition to Hall being claimed as a part of internet celebrity history, Hall also claims herself as part of the internet community. Her music video “We Are The Web” captures this perspective. While this video was released in 2006, YouTube statistics show that the video’s viewership has been fairly steady, aside from a major spike in 2008. At the time of writing in April 2018, the video had over three hundred thousand views, fourteen hundred likes, and two hundred forty dislikes. The description to “We Are the Web” states:

The issue of net neutrality is reaching a boiling point, and the results will affect every Internet user in the US. We Are the Web is here to raise awareness with the help of some of the web's biggest names: Leslie Hall, The Tron Guy, and Peter Pan. Check out the music video, and share this important message.

This description not only puts forth its political message in support of net neutrality, but it also claims Hall and her co-stars as internet celebrities specifically by calling them “some of the web’s biggest names.”

The aesthetics of “We Are the Web” are simple, allowing the video’s production quality to seem current even though the video is ten years old. Hall and her fellow internet stars are set against a plain white background with wearetheweb.org in the lower left corner, and the camera zooms in and out on them throughout. Each celebrity is wearing the type of outfit that made them famous in the first place—Leslie is wearing tight gold pants, a very flashy multi-color gem sweater, and her signature bouffant and glasses, Tron Guy is wearing his Tron costume, and Peter Pan his Peter Pan costume.

The video begins with Hall slowly singing, “Wake up everybody, stop sleepin’/they wanna charge more/big companies are creepin’ into our internet.” During this stanza, which is accompanied by subtle synth chords, the camera slowly zooms into Hall’s over-the-top facial expressions. The camera then quickly zooms even closer to Hall’s face, cutting off the top of her head as she sings “internet’s in distress, let’s answer the SOS,” during which a funk bass line enters and the tempo picks up. The camera then zooms out to show Hall’s whole body, which thrusts and head bops to the newly entered drum loop, over which Hall begins to rap the chorus: “I’m the internet, you’re the internet/we’re the internet, now that’s the internet/I like the internet, we love the internet and I can prove it.”

Peter Pan then appears alone, the camera alternating between close-ups of Pan’s face and full body shots of him prancing. He sings: “Some ‘net fairy dust made me who I

am/livin' in an online Neverland/The web's my playground, no suits allowed/internet celebrity, let's sing it proud." During the end of Pan's line, Hall appears again, now wearing a silver space-esque suit with a dramatic cape and a cassette tape in the middle of her abdomen. Pan and Hall dance and sing the chorus together, which is interwoven with clips of Hall doing the robot dance in her gem sweater. During the end of the chorus, we see a close shot of Tron Guy's costume, parts of it lighting up blue. The camera zooms back and forth between shots of varying degrees of closeness while Tron dances and walks arrhythmically, singing: "It's not my tights that cut off circulation/Big business wants to control the net nation/What you can see, how much you should pay/Tell me is this the democratic way?" The three internet celebrities then repeat the chorus twice, freestyle dancing in different combinations and with Hall switching between the silver outfit and her gold pants/gem sweater outfit.

A few measures of the slow synth chords we heard in the beginning enter while the celebrities continue dancing. Hall then repeats the "wake up everybody" lyrics we heard at the start of the song, adding the extra bridge "Keep it free and keep it open/Speak up or the world wide web will be broken," after which the three celebrities repeat the chorus four times. They continue dancing as various other internet celebrities and memes (e.g., "dancing baby") are interwoven into the shots. At the end of the song, we hear the iconic dial-up internet sound as each celebrity disappears from the screen and we are left with the blank white screen with the wearetheweb.org address in the corner.

The lyrics of "We Are the Web," especially those such as "tell me is this the democratic way?" and "I am the internet, you are the internet, we are the internet, now that's the internet" speak to the notion that the internet is a community of everyday users

and is “supposed to be” an equal playing ground for producing content and achieving fame. Further, the lyrics “big companies are creepin’ into our internet” and “internet’s in distress, let’s answer the SOS” posit big media as predatory to the poor gentle internet, which is crying out for help. The line “big business wants to control the net nation” not only positions big business as the “bad guy,” but in calling the imagined internet community the “net nation,” the lyrics paint a picture of the internet as an imagined united front, just as nation states are imagined. In these ways, it is clear that Hall and her costars view the internet in much the same way that YouTubers do. While scholars such as Turner have argued against the notion that the internet is democratic, the imagined community of YouTubers and the lyrics of “We Are the Web” make clear that the internet is or at least was perceived as a place of equality wherein anyone can attain an audience, and that big media corporations are seen as a threat to the allegedly democratic playground of YouTube.

While “We Are the Web” was made in reaction to threats to net neutrality at the time of its creation, users throughout the twelve years since its release have commented on its continued relevance. For example, just three months ago, Sir Twizbiz simply stated: “The current relevancy makes this weird.” Other users write more elaborately about threats to net neutrality over the years. For instance, in 2009, Tomos Halsey wrote, “Unless you under educated, narrow minded jackasses haven’t noticed, the government is taking over our freedom on the net. That is what this video is referring to...and I totally agree with them. The Internet needs net neutrality!” Other users made similar remarks, at times describing particular pieces of legislation. For example, in 2014, user James Bradford wrote, “This morning, a federal appellate court vacated FCC rules guaranteeing net neutrality, effectively giving Internet service providers the right to throttle data speeds and

demand premium rates for content providers.” Similarly, in 2016, zeldaed123 wrote: “Y’know, with TPP, this song has a stronger meaning for me. In fact, I think we should make an update of this song and tell the TPP lovers where to stick their little deal!”

Other users speak to media users’ quest for uncontrolled media in general. For example, in 2010, Cthrilla wrote “This is silly but true people need to realize the power we have with the internet and how much life would suck with out it. But once it’s controlled we’d dump it and find something [sic] new just like radio tv and other controlled media. : P” Instead of the threat of big business or government specifically, other users focus on the internet’s perceived relationship to democracy. For instance, in 2010, webwombel wrote, “Forget the quality of the video (I don’t like it by the way), listen to the message. Yes, we are the Internet, it’s THE infrastructure for vital democracy.”

Some users write nostalgically, almost with a sense of loss of the time when “We Are The Web” was created. One example of this is from 2012, when YouTube user LorelaiLeigh wrote, “Damn, I remember when this first came out and was featured on Youtube. Now look at YT. Ads everywhere and totally commercialized. Huh.” In 2017, Ryno similarly remarked on YouTube’s changes over time, citing those changes as a potential reason for why Hall’s career has slowed. They write, “I believe the current state of YouTube is what’s keeping Leslie Hall in hibernation.” Ryno’s comment portrays a deep sense of connection between Leslie Hall and the commonly held nostalgic view of YouTube’s history of perceived openness and democracy, and comments such as LorelaiLeigh’s describe YouTube’s gradual transition from a wild west of amateur expression wherein work such as Leslie’s was prominent and untainted by commercial distractions.

As we can see in the conversation about Leslie Hall as an integral part of the history of YouTube celebrity in the “YouTubers React” video, as well as comments such as Lorelai Leigh’s and Ryno’s, the work of Leslie Hall is seen as a part of YouTube’s origin story, a romantic time when internet and YouTube celebrityhood was becoming a phenomenon, and the work of ordinary people like Hall had a place to exist and become popular. In addition to others positioning Hall as an exemplification of YouTube’s ordinary-to-celebrity narrative and therefore quite significant to the site, Hall also clearly identifies as part of the internet community more broadly, as words such as “I am the internet, we are the internet” show.

YouTube: The “Weird Part of the Internet”

Hall is not only seen as an integral part of YouTube’s history, but she is also considered part of a specific part of YouTube and the internet: the “weird part.” As evidenced by the viewing patterns for “Tight Pants / Body Rolls,” which has gone viral several times and maintains a steady viewership in general, while Hall has not attained a mainstream following like Oakley or Marbles, her videos have something the internet still wants: weirdness. Although there is not much academic writing on the internet’s seeming addiction to all things weird aside from one other dissertation (Loy 2014), colloquially the weirdness of the internet--and sometimes YouTube more specifically--seems to be part of a common understanding among the imagined community of the internet. For example, the “Know Your Meme” website even has a page describing “The Weird Part of YouTube.” The page states that the phrase came about in 2011 when people started writing it in response to suggested YouTube videos that were irrelevant to what the user was watching

previously, and defines the phrase as “an expression used in response to a video post that may be deemed disturbing or eccentric in content” (Know Your Meme 2012).

When it comes to Leslie Hall, it seems like viewers are delighted or repulsed by her strangeness, or more often, both. For example, user Philip Wielgus describes the “Willow Don’t Cry” video as “utterly disturbing and enthralling.” Many of the “Tight Pants” comments call attention to the strangeness of the video as well, as commenters write about the video being located in “the weird part” of the internet or of YouTube. For example, in response to the “Tight Pants” video, one commenter wrote “I’m in that weird part of YouTube again” and another stated “I’m on the weird side of YouTube again. HELP ME.” The comments for the “Willow Don’t Cry” video are very similar. For instance, user witherPlayz/TutorialPE writes “wtf is this” and in response, Archmage Nick answers “the weird side of youtube.” Kushthee Msft put it more ominously, writing “oo im on this side o youtube again im out.” Others don’t seem to agree that any particular part of YouTube is “weird,” but rather that the entirety of the site is. Junebug Jones, for example, writes “the weird part of youtube is the ONLY part of youtube” in response to paddo z’s comment “oh lord, it’s the weird part of youtube again...” Others do not attribute the weirdness of Hall’s videos to YouTube specifically, but instead chalk it up to the internet in general, stating things like “now I know I am on the weird part of the internet,” or simply “welcome to the Internet.” There are nearly endless examples of such comments by YouTube users in the comments sections of Hall’s video posts, and both “Willow” and “Tight Pants” have appeared on playlists entitled “The Weird Part of YouTube” or something similar (and often among far more sinister videos).

The YouTubers from the “React” video also recognize the general weirdness of YouTube, and seem to accept “Tight Pants” as an exemplification of that quality. Indeed, when asked why they thought Hall’s “Tight Pants” went viral, the reasons several YouTubers provided had to do with how weird the video is. For example, RoosterTeeth’s Michael Jones stated “people like weird shit. It was definitely fucking weird,” and Vsauce’s Michael Stevens said “everything about it is just so off that it’s perfect.”

Along with the weirdness of “Tight Pants,” some have commented on the terribly amateur quality of the video. VenusAngelic, one of the YouTubers in the “React” video, commented on its aesthetic, stating “it has a catchy tune and it’s really bad quality and that just makes it awesome.” Users Steven Clarke, Felicity R, and reno legerski posted very similar comments, writing “so bad its [sic] good,” “this was simultaneously the best and worst thing I’ve ever watched,” and “this is so terrible that it’s entertaining,” respectively. Others comment amusedly, in particular about the very obvious green screen background in “Tight Pants.” For instance, Miss Oli writes sarcastically, “Those are some top notch green screen effects I’m blown away.” ∩_∩ RoboBro679 ∪_∪ writes that they “Love that green screen,” and Wonhoes Ovaries simply commented “BEST QUALITY EVER.”

Not all responses to the DIY quality of Hall’s videos are positive, however. For example, user jschrock commented, “Big Business, save us from the no talent bullshit of the neutral Internet” and riversyorke2 wrote, “This is such contrived art school hipster crap,” in response to “Willow Don’t Cry.” About the “Tight Pants” music video, user F. I wrote “This is the result When you get rejected from America’s Got Talent but think your [sic] talented.” These comments provide an interesting contrast to the disappointment expressed by YouTube’s users when commercial content became a part of the site,

especially F. I's mention of the mainstream talent competition show *America's Got Talent*, which he presumes Leslie would be rejected from, as well as jcshrock's comment about the talentlessness of "the neutral Internet." Also of interest about such comments is that they position the internet as a respite for those so ordinary and strange they cannot succeed through mainstream channels--including mainstream channels designed to launch ordinary people into fame, as is the case with *America's Got Talent*.

While such negative users posit Leslie's work as a failure at mainstream quality (in such a way that they dislike, as opposed to the users who are amused by how terrible the video is), still others conceive of Leslie's videos as a refreshing disruption to mainstream media. For example, in response to "Willow Don't Cry," user Cassidy Jennings writes, "More creativity in their little pinky finger than the entirety of Hollywood has seen in....well....since FOREVER! In the world!" ratsbirds similarly states, "You are so talented. Isn't she funny? Much better than some stuff they have on tv." These comments align with the YouTube community's aforementioned belief in the site as a platform for self-broadcasting work that would not typically be found in the mainstream media. From these comments--the good, the bad, and the mixed--it is clear that many see Leslie's work as an exemplification of the internet and YouTube in weirdness as well as in ordinariness. Her work is indeed amateur, its DIY quality apparent and pronounced, and weirdness is the aspect upon which users most commonly comment.

Leslie Hall's Fan Community

As we have seen, Hall positions herself as part of the internet community, is considered an important part of YouTube's history specifically, and is also viewed as encapsulating the "essence" of the internet: weirdness. In addition to being significant in

these ways, it is clear that Hall has a noteworthy fan base because many have posted fan videos of Hall's work. There are at least three types of these videos: live performances of Hall's songs caught on video, reenactments of her music videos, and music videos made for Leslie Hall songs for which no video exists. Of the third type, one such video is called "Shake Your Hips' - A Leslie Hall Fan Video," and was posted on September 7, 2014 on Josh Snares' YouTube page. The "About" section of Snares' page declares: "Hi, I'm Josh, I like to make trashy films with lots of homosexual undertones, but also have a passion for Doctor Who and many projects revolve around that." The description for "Shake" states: "Powerful stuff inspired by a powerful lady, Leslie Hall. This was submitted as my Music Video for my Experimental film course, thank you Leslie for being a huge inspiration in my life!" Hall's inspiration in Snares' work is apparent not only in that he made a fan video for one of Hall's songs, but also because there are many elements of the video that speak back to Hall's music videos, which I describe below.

The video begins with the words "SHAKE YOUR HIPS" in sparkling gold font displayed next to a supersized fuchsia martini glass in which Snares floats. The writing and martini glass are superimposed in front of an image of an undisclosed city. Although the song itself begins differently, Snares implemented sonic parts of other Hall videos. Floating with him in the martini glass is a black rotary phone on top of a platter. The phone rings, the camera zooming slowly into a close-up of it bubbling in the pink martini, after which it zooms into Snare's face. He is wearing a long pink wig and holding a decorative staff behind him, a serious demeanor on his face. The camera focuses back on the phone, which is still ringing, after which we see a profile view of Josh's face, his hand holding the phone to his ear while he holds a pink martini and mouths to Hall's voice, saying "Ring-A-Ding-Ding" as

she does on the “Ring My Bell” video. The shot is split in two with the image of Josh on top, awash in pink hue. On the bottom is a masked face holding the phone, the background more of a yellowish hue. The masked person says “I want you to teach me how to dance,” after which Snares makes a licking motion toward the phone handle and slams the phone down.

The shot switches to outer space and then zooms into a planet we then learn is Venus by way of shimmering gold font in the sky above what appears to be a castle. Josh is standing near a throne, his decorative staff in hand, and is wearing a blousy pink jumpsuit, the neon of which matches her standard color scheme. Before him stand several people wearing black outfits and neon pink masks with matching spiky hair who are dancing awkwardly. The camera switches between Snares and the pink masks, him confidently dancing and them intently watching and trying to mimic his movements. When the chorus hits, Snares is standing in the pink martini with four of the pink masks behind him, dancing and turning in circles. Next we see a very familiar tactic from Hall’s work: the camera is focused very closely on Snares’ face with two of the pink masks much smaller in the shot (Figure 3). This harkens back to “Tight Pants/Body Rolls,” where we see a close-up of Hall’s face with the LYs much smaller in the bottom of the shot (Figure 4).

Later in the video, Snares uses another technique from “Tight Pants/Body Rolls”: multiple images of his body layered on the screen, doing body rolls (Figure 5). Hall uses a very similar layering technique in “Tight Pants,” except that hers is layers of her body doing similar rolling motions that are not exactly the same (Figure 6), whereas the similar moment in Snares’ video appears to layer the same clip over one another. Immediately following that, Snares does a dance move that Hall does in “Tight Pants” (Figure 7),

wherein she uses her arms to scoot her body from one side of the screen to another (Figure 8).



Figure 3: Screenshot from “Shake Your Hips” wherein Snares recreates a tactic from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” in which small images of the LYs are juxtaposed over a close-up of Hall’s face.



Figure 4: Screenshot from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” in which small images of the LYs are juxtaposed over a close-up of Hall’s face

In addition to these similarities in dance and film technique, Snares captures Hall’s essence in other ways. One example of this is facial expression; in her videos, Hall tends to have very over-the-top grotesque facial expressions, while the LYs and others in the background are deliberately deadpan. Though Snares’ facial expressions are a little more subdued and certainly not grotesque, the “Shake Your Hips” video replicates the deadpan

faces of the LYs. Aside from Snares, most everyone in the video is wearing a mask that completely covers their faces, which forces their faces to be expressionless. Despite Snares' expressions not being very over-the-top, these deadpan masks still allow his facial expressions to come to the fore, making him the center of attention. To that end, the power dynamics between Snares and the others in his videos is similar to those in Hall's videos, where she always positions herself as in charge--the central focus around which everything happens. Snares' video is the same way; he is the one teaching others how to shake their hips, controlling the action in each scene, and even has a throne on which to sit.



Figure 5: Screenshot from "Shake Your Hips" in which three images of Snares' body rolls are layered over one another.



Figure 6: Screenshot from "Tight Pants / Body Rolls" wherein multiple images of Hall's body rolls are seen in the same shot.



Figure 7: Screenshot from “Shake Your Hips” in which Snares uses his arms to scoot from one side of the shot to another as Hall does in “Tight Pants / Body Rolls.”



Figure 8: Screenshot from “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” wherein Hall uses her arms to scoot from one side of the shot to another.

The major contrast between Snares’ video and all of Hall’s work is that the shape of his body is not a major focus. Although he dances often in the video, the dancing is very subtle and his costume is oversized, meaning that we never really see the shape of his body, which appears to probably be much slenderer than Hall’s (and perhaps the oversized costume was a way of making up for his lack of bulk). As I will discuss in chapter four on fatness and monstrosity, Hall calling attention to her fat body by way of tight costumes and

dance moves that cause her fat to jiggle is a key component to her work, so it comes as a surprise that Snares does not make use of this tactic even if his body differs greatly from Hall's. Because Snares' video is one of the few fan videos that does not attempt to replicate one of Hall's existing videos and instead makes a music video when there is not one, that gave him more leeway in terms of what tactics to keep or not. The tactics Snares chooses to keep or omit provide insight into how others view Hall's work or what in it they see as important. To me (and, it seems, many others), Hall's accentuations of her body is a mainstay of her shtick, but what Snares took away had more to do with power, neon colors, and other means of taking up space than with the monstrosity of fat bodies or the performance of Midwesternness.

Although Snares did not call much attention to his body, other fan videos reenact Hall's music videos, at times using that reenactment as a means of calling attention to their bodies. One example of this is titled "Tight Pants Body Rolls Redux," a fan video with just under 30,000 views. This video does not take Hall's work simply as inspiration, but rather attempts to completely reenact the original "Tight Pants / Body Rolls" video. "Redux" was filmed against a blank white wall in what looks like a college apartment. It is truly amateur in that no editing techniques were used; it is simply a group of young people dancing in front of a video camera that does not move. Because of that, the video does not replicate the techniques used in the original video or in Snares' video, so the performers in the video play with taking up space by moving closer and further away from the camera instead. Everyone in the video wears even lower budget approximations of the original costumes: "Leslie" wears a gold lamé suit with black duct tape for the seams, the "LYs" are wearing white tiger costumes with sunglasses, and the "trolls" are wearing all green.

What is noteworthy about the video is not only that it reenacts “Tight Pants” almost exactly, but also that Hall chose it to be on her “Fan Tributes” playlist. In addition to acknowledging and honoring the fan video that way, Hall also commented on the video (but under her Yarn House YouTube channel for whatever reason), saying “THIS IS AMAZING!!! IF i had a million dollars to invest in your next triumph I WOULD!! WHERE DO YOU LIVE!!! HOW LONG DID THIS TAKE TO MAKE!!? what snacks did you eat while making it?! CAN WE BE FRIENDS!!” In these ways, not only do Halls fans honor her with these videos, but she honors (some of) them back by commenting and acknowledging the videos as tributes.

Willow Don't Cry

In addition to speaking in support of fan videos of her work, Hall has also made fan videos of her own. One example of this is the music video “Willow Don’t Cry,” which she made in collaboration with *Dungeon Majesty*, a public access program that ran from 2004 to 2010 and featured a cast of four women who played the game Dungeons and Dragons. The cast would act out some of the scenes from the game, sometimes bringing in clips or material from mainstream fantasy films and television shows (e.g., *Star Trek*). “Willow Don’t Cry” was uploaded to YouTube in 2007, although the song itself was released as a “secret song” on Hall’s 2006 album, *Door Man’s Daughter*. The beginning of the video has little to do with the 1988 George Lucas film *Willow* about which the song is written, but instead shows Hall battling with the *Dungeon Majesty* cast in what she refers to as her “gem world,” after which they all “unite to celebrate the journey of Willow.”

The film “Willow” is about an unassuming Nelwyn farmer and magician apprentice who finds a Daikini baby in a river, who has been sent downriver to save her life from the

evil Queen Bavmorda, who is out to destroy the child because of a prophecy stating the child will be the Queen's downfall. After encountering the baby, Willow and his fellow townspeople discover who the baby is and what needs to be done to rescue her. As such, Willow embarks on a journey through a war-torn land to deliver her to Tir Asleen, a kingdom in which a good queen and king will look after her. Needless to say, Willow's journey ended up being quite the long and often dangerous adventure, but (spoiler alert) everything turns out well in the end--the evil queen is defeated, the baby is in a safe space, and Willow returns home to his village a better magician and person than he was before.

Hall and the cast of *Dungeon Majesty* reenact this journey. She serves as the narrator of the video, singing the story of Willow's adventure, occasionally saying one liners from the film, and providing him with encouraging words. For example, the words of the chorus are "Go Willow, go Willow, go!.../Come on Willow and don't you cry/I don't wanna see you die, no no no/Deliver that Daikini child to Tir Asleen/Rise and shine like a fire/You're beautiful when you explode." The majority of the video shows Hall in the foreground, dancing and gesticulating in a golden jumpsuit and space-esque sunglasses, while Willow (and sometimes other characters from the film, such as the village sorcerer, High Aldwin) dances gracefully through different parts of a very sparkly forest. In addition, at times there are psychedelic drawings layered over the video (Figure 9) that float in and out of the scene. Similarly, the video itself is strung together through a series of wipe transitions, meaning that each new shot pushes the last shot out of view, creating a string of images and video clips sliding in and out in various directions, and quickly. This sliding in and out of scenes causes the video to have more of a montage feel, as opposed to a seamless narrative.



Figure 9: Neon tree and grass are layered over and around Hall in "Willow Don't Cry." Screenshot from YouTube.

In addition to making a full blown fan video based on *Willow*, Hall engages in other deliberate and obvious fan behavior. For example, Hall compares herself to mainstream celebrities in a tongue-in-cheek way, saying things like "This is my Britney Spears-inspired circus outfit. My mom made a plus-size one for me to wear" (Andres 2009), or "I think Britney, Rihanna, Beyoncé, we're all doing the same thing" (Ibid.). In saying such things, Hall actually calls attention to the discrepancies between her fame and that of Britney and Beyoncé, who attained fame through mainstream channels and adhere to conventional notions of beauty and capitalist success. By wearing a plus-size version of a Britney outfit or saying things such as "The Spice Girls use rotating, lifting stage risers. We used a lazy Susan and some of my dad's garage door parts and built our own little turntable" (Ibid.), Hall both aligns herself with and provides contrast to mainstream celebrities in both body size and class.

Hall also parodies the work of other celebrities. One example of this is her first album, *Door Man's Daughter*, which plays off of *Coal Miner's Daughter*, which is the title of

the song (1970), biography (1976) and biopic (1980) of Loretta Lynn. *Coal Miner's Daughter* tells the story of how Lynn grew up one of eight children living on a coal miner's salary and rose to fame by tenacity and talent. What is interesting about Hall parodying Lynn is not simply that she is parodying celebrity in general, but that she is parodying a celebrity whose journey from ordinary to famous is well known. This feeds into the YouTube and reality television narrative of celebrifying the ordinary off of which Hall's work plays, as well as the lower-class Midwestern culture she performs, which is the topic of the following chapter.

“Not from the East, not from the West, Girls in the middle that rock the best” - Leslie Hall, “Midwest Diva”

Chapter Two. The Pioneer Woman of Gem Sweaters: Camping Midwestern Femininities

In addition to performing ordinariness through her enactments of the YouTube celebrity narrative and celebrity/fan position, Hall also utilizes “the ordinary” in her performance of Midwesternness. As previously mentioned, Hall is from Iowa--a fact that many celebrities might want to ignore about themselves, but for Hall, it’s a deliberate selling point. With the Twitter handle @midwestdiva and a song of the same name, Hall does not merely consider the Midwest her home, but centers Midwesternness as a major theme of her “internetness.” As such, this chapter explores the ways that Hall draws on and plays up Midwestern stereotypes. I demonstrate that Hall performs or “camps” two somewhat different but ultimately connected notions about the Midwest: plainness and tackiness. Drawing on scholarship on pastoral representations of the Midwest, I analyze the music video “Gravel in My Shoe” --the only video in which Hall’s appearance significantly differs from her tacky and over-the-top gold pants shtick--to show how Hall performs white, rural heteronormativity, rescuing the plain Midwestern housewife from her loveless marriage. Lyrical and musical analyses of Hall’s songs “Churn the Butter” and “Moving Out of Iowa” further demonstrate Hall’s performance of plain Midwesternness.

In addition to examining Hall’s use of pastoral Midwestern stereotypes, I show how Hall most often performs a different regional trope: that Midwesterners have “low taste” and a lack of discernment when it comes to fashion and appearance. Incorporating scholarship regarding the region’s association with poor taste and out-of-date fashions, I

posit that the centrality of the gem sweater in Hall's work exemplifies her play with this "tacky" trope, and that the gem sweater itself can be viewed as a metaphor for Midwestern femininity. Using scholarship on drag and the aesthetic of camp, I show how Hall falls into that, well, camp (pun intended). That is, Hall's performance of outrageously tacky Midwestern femininity is camp, and her appearance closely resembles that of a drag queen. Further, in addition to explaining that camp often involves an exaggeration of femininity and showing that Hall's camp involves an exaggeration of Midwestern femininity specifically, I also convey that her work employs camp's love affair with anachronism in her use of outdated fashions, such as gem sweaters. I argue that Hall's obsession with gem sweaters and camping of regional tropes revitalizes and revalues Midwestern femininity by imagining a world in which it is rescued and put in the spotlight.

Camp is in Session

I would like to begin with an overview of the camp aesthetic in order to discuss how Hall employs it. Generally, people use the word "camp" or "campy" to refer to a deliberately over-the-top, humorous exaggeration. Widely regarded as the seminal text on camp is Susan Sontag's 1964 "Notes on Camp," in which she describes camp's essence as "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag 1964: 1) and states that the camp sensibility "converts the serious into the frivolous" (Ibid.). Although Sontag's work has been critiqued for divorcing camp from homosexuality (Van Leer 1995), much of the camp scholarship that followed Sontag focused on camp's relationship to homosexual male cultures, often through the lens of drag. For example, in *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer draws a connection between gay male cultural politics and camp, claiming that camp constituted "a kind of going public or coming out before the emergence of gay liberationist

politics” for gay men (1986, 115). Or, as Andrew Ross states in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989), “While a case for the lesbian relation to camp has been made, it is the gay male ‘possession’ of that culture which has been stressed most often” (Ross 1989: 158). Ross’ quote conveys that ownership of camp has largely been attributed to gay males, and this attribution has been central to scholarship on the matter.

Queer and feminist scholars such as J. Halberstam, Rachel Devitt, and Pamela Robertson, make similar assertions, and work to trouble the notion that camp belongs solely to gay males. Working from the idea that camp calls attention to social constructions of gender, they explore the use of camp in queer and feminist contexts and leave room for many body types and identities to have a relationship to camp. For example, in *Female Masculinity* (1998), J. Halberstam asserts that camp is often associated with performances of femininity in particular. She writes, “because camp is predicated on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender, it tends to be the genre for an outrageous performance of femininity (by men or women) rather than outrageous performances of masculinity” (Halberstam 1998: 237). While some associate camp solely with cisgender male drag queens, most likely because such performers are better known and more widespread and because exaggerative femininity is perhaps more apparent when performed by someone assigned male at birth, Halberstam contends that at the core of camp is a performance of exaggerated femininity, and the gender of the camp performer is not limited to any single body or identity.

In addition to Halberstam’s assertion that camp is most frequently associated with outrageous performances of femininity by gay male drag queens, authors such as Pamela Robertson (1990) and Rachel Devitt (2006) have examined drag performances by

performers who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) in particular. The former argues that, while camp is not always feminist, it does have “an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment,” and is therefore examinable as feminist practice (Robertson 1990: 6). Robertson argues that both lesbian and heterosexual women have historically engaged in feminist camp practices, and that this tradition of feminist camp runs alongside but is not identical to gay camp (1990: 9). Sontag, despite her earlier comments about the relationship between homosexual men and camp, also drew a correlation between camp and feminism. Andrew Ross describes this in a discussion of a 1975 interview with Sontag, stating:

Sontag suggested that the diffusion of camp taste in the earlier part of the decade ought to be credited ‘with a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s.’ In particular, she claims that the fascination with the “corny flamboyance of femaleness” in certain actresses helped to “undermine the credibility of certain stereotyped femininities--by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks.” (Ross 1989: 161)

Here, Ross relays that Sontag sees camp as a part of a feminist upsurge because such performances call attention to how femininity is constructed and stereotyped, as the exaggeration reveals the ways that the construction of femininity is always already ridiculous.

Devitt, whose fieldwork involved working with communities of AFAB drag queens (who she also refers to as “femme drag queens” and “bio-queens”), critiques scholarship that solely connects assigned male at birth (AMAB) bodies with drag queens and AFAB bodies to drag kings, stating that such ideas reify the gender binary. She draws from Judith Butler, who asserts that drag has the power to demonstrate that “‘imitation’ is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a

constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (Devitt 2006: 30, emphasis in original). Based on Butler’s notion that drag calls attention to the performance required to idealize gender, Devitt argues that femme drag is distinctly able to point out the general performativity of gender, given that “it does not depend on an assumed incongruity between ‘actual’ and staged gender” (Ibid: 37). As Devitt writes, “performing and parodying the gender [femme drag queens] are assumed to have allows femme drag queens to critique the connection between biology or body and gender or performance in ways not available to conventional drag queens” (Ibid.).

Similar to Devitt’s work regarding AFAB drag queens’ critique of the perceived connection between “biology or body and gender,” I posit that Leslie Hall employs a persona or shtick that is very similar to that of a drag queen. I will resist calling it such simply because I have seen no indication that she considers herself a drag queen. To be clear, Hall’s persona is still named “Leslie Hall,” but there is a distinction between Hall as a person and the ways she constructs herself for performance. Nate Lodgson (2009) discusses her performance persona, stating that in his experience, Hall kind of slides between person and persona. He writes: “Leslie Hall, the person, has created a durable character called ‘Leslie Hall’ and this character is continually developing...It isn’t always clear where one ends and the other begins, yet there are distinct behavioral modes that distinguish the overlapping entities, the person and the persona” (Lodgson 2009). Based on this assertion that there is some distinction between Leslie Hall the person and Leslie Hall the character or persona, going forward I will use “her persona” to describe this character Hall portrays. I liken this persona to that of a drag queen because Hall shows the performativity of femininity through her over-the-top feminine appearance and

exaggerated performance tactics. As I will later explore, Hall's persona most frequently performs a specifically Midwest tacky femininity that is similar to the drag queen Divine, Mimi from *The Drew Carey Show*, and Roseanne Conner from the 1990s television series *Roseanne*. But what is important for now is that Hall's work is campy and often similar to that of drag queens.

However, Hall's standard tacky, over-the-top persona is not the only style of femininity she camps. While camp refers to an exaggeration, scholarship and general notions regarding the concept typically connect campy femininity to heavy makeup, big hair, and big personality. But if "camp" refers to an exaggerative performance that reveals stereotypes or social constructions, that means that all stereotypes and constructions are viable to be camped. In Hall's case, she camps not only femininity similar to that which is typically camped (i.e., over-the-top glamour), but also an unadorned femininity--both of which can be considered Midwestern in different but connected ways. As I will next explore, the most common stereotype of the Midwest is that the people who inhabit what is perceived to be an entirely rural region are plain, white, and heteronormative, and Hall at times camps this stereotype as well.

Corn and Cold

The predominant stereotype of the Midwest as a rural, agriculturally-focused region inhabited by normative white people stems from the region's agricultural history. The term "Middle West" initially came about in the 19th century. Westward expansion was occurring rapidly and the region then known as the Northwest Territory--comprised of the states we now know as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota--needed a new description. However, the term "Middle West," which became commonplace by the

1880s, was initially used to describe the “rapidly maturing, mainstream American rural society” of Kansas and Nebraska specifically (Shortridge 1990: 17). Over the following three decades, much confusion surrounded the term, as it started to be used to “include not only the central plains but also the lands northward to the Dakotas and eastward all the way to Buffalo and Pittsburgh” (Ibid: 22). By 1912, however, confusion was alleviated as the name “Middle West” picked up speed in popular articles, and began to describe twelve specific states: Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

Although the term “Midwest” is commonly applied to these twelve states, unlike national borders, the boundaries of American regions (and even more so, the identities of those regions) are far less clearly defined. While there are certain states such as Iowa or Minnesota that seem to be universally considered part of the “heartland,” states that are less centrally Midwestern are more open to discussion as to their regional belonging. For example, the easternmost states of the Midwest such as Michigan and Ohio are sometimes associated with the east coast, likely due to also being considered part of the “rust belt” because of their industrial nature. Additionally, the more southern states such as Missouri are sometimes considered part of the South.

James Shortridge describes the murkiness of Midwestern regional identity, stating that the notion of a Middle West regional identity becomes more and more muddled the more one thinks about it; most writers consider the region to be comprised of “the twelve states extending westward from Ohio to Kansas and then northward to the Canadian border,” but there are many exceptions. For example, some writers conceive of the

Midwest as lying west of the Mississippi River, while others locate the region entirely east of that river (Shortridge 1989: 3).

While the concept of a regional identity is tenuous, the popular imaginary is not without common conceptions for each region of the United States. While cultural similarities or conventions may exist within each region, there is also a high likelihood of those similarities being shared across regions. A regional identity, then, is a construct built upon imagination, narrative, and representation. As Kathleen Neils Conzen writes:

Regional identities are ultimately stories that matter. Like other forms of identity, they rest on constructed narratives that organize the infinity of human experience into a selective coherence capable of explaining some, at least, of who we are, where we came from, with whom and how we should interact..." (2001: 92)

It is these "stories that matter" that make up our conceptions for each region, and as such, I am more interested in the imagery and cultural values that became categorized by region than I am in which states qualify as part of which region.

Media such as film, television, and music videos are a common site of representation for these regional narratives and can therefore provide insight into the way regions are commonly imagined. For example, many depictions of the northeast fill us with images of fast-paced urbanites and preppy, rich white people. The South is more commonly represented with slow drawls, porch-sitting Southern Belles, and sweet tea. The Midwest, on the other hand, is a region with far fewer marked characteristics, as it is often seen as a large expanse of land inhabited by very few people. That barrenness has become the Midwest's most popular signifier, and the small-town cultural values and wide open spaces associated with rural American life have become the means through which the Midwest is frequently represented. Depictions of the region are often set in rural, snow- or corn-filled areas. For example, the film (1996) and television show (2014-present) *Fargo* are set in a

small, snowy town with characters so plain that their most memorable feature is their accents (aside from those who are murderers, but that is beside the point). Hence, despite being home to numerous urban centers including Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit, the Midwest is most commonly associated with rurality and agriculture. As James Shortridge writes of *The Wizard of Oz* novel and the Midwest more generally, “farming is the dominant image in Baum’s Middle West, as it has been in the accounts of journalists throughout [the 20th] century. The image contrasts not only with the sophisticated, exotic Oz...but with the predominantly urban reality of the modern Middle West” (Shortridge 1989: 2).

In addition to the association between the Midwest and ruralism, the popular imaginary also equates the region with normativity, politeness, and the mainstream. To that end, Andrew R. L. Cayton writes:

[S]ince the Anglo-American conquest of the Ohio Valley in the late eighteenth century, few people have felt passionate about the Midwest. Indeed, for at least a hundred years, passion is something rarely associated with the region. A wide spectrum of novelists and filmmakers, journalists and television producers, have nurtured an image of the Midwest as a land of normalcy and niceness. (2001: 141)

Because of this conception of the Midwest as a rural region inhabited by normal, nice, white people, there is also an underlying assumption that Midwesterners are plain and unfashionable. As Cayton states, “Midwesterners as a collective are, more often than not, presented as being as flat and featureless as the prairie landscape they all supposedly inhabit” (Ibid). As overly homogenizing as this perception of Midwesternness is, Hall puts these stereotypes to good use. Indeed, the parts of Hall’s work wherein she camps this normativity and plainness truly exemplifies the words “flat,” “featureless,” and “prairie.”

The Rural Housewife Goes to Camp

The only video example of Hall appearing truly plain and flat is “Gravel in My Shoe,” which was uploaded onto YouTube in February of 2010. Instead of her standard tacky and exaggerated appearance, Hall’s look in “Gravel” is remarkably unremarkable. The video shows Hall in a denim romper with a yellow blouse underneath, her hair lying flatly around her make-up free face--a stark difference from her typically gigantic hair and garish costume and makeup. Hall even humorously points out her stripped-down appearance in the caption of the video:

This one i blame on iowa. I'm living here corn and cold. This was the country sting i was going for. FIRST TIME EVER i let that hair down.. I felt like reba without the curls. or maria with out the make up. naked.. i'm naked. but I did it. BUT DO NOT EXPECT ME to look like this on tour... OH NO. MORE GLITZ AND LESS ZITS

Given that “Gravel” is the only video in which Hall appears in this plain fashion, it is noteworthy that she “blames” this difference on Iowa in the above quote. This attribution of blame seems to frame Iowa (and by extension, the Midwest) as a place of plainness, where being “corn and cold” causes her to veer away, however momentarily, from her typical glitz and glam.

In addition to Hall’s appearance, the setting of the video is also plain and very rural. The video is set around and in a one-story house surrounded by lots of trees, grass, and dirt, and parts of it are shot in an open field and on an unpaved road (this is where the gravel comes in). The video opens to a makeup-free Leslie Hall wearing a denim romper (Figure 9) with a yellow blouse underneath, her hair lying flatly on her neck as she dutifully mows the lawn. Her stocky, bearded husband appears, getting out of his car after what was presumably a day at work, and also looking plain in baggy worn jeans and plain green t-shirt. She smiles and waves at him. He shakes his head dismissively, neglecting to wave

back. He walks toward the house, leaving Hall upset as she returns to disgruntledly mowing the lawn.

Next, Laura--a band member of Leslie and the LYs--chops wood in a denim jumper while her husband (played by the same actor as Hall's husband) sits on a log near her, staring off into the distance while drinking a beer. Hall's voice is heard singing "when you marry him/it's supposed to be forever/but forever just goes on way too long," the sentiment of which matches the skull-numbing boredom that appears on the face of band member Ramona as she stirs a pot in the kitchen. Her husband, again played by the same person as Hall's, pats her on the backside. Hall sings "I just need to go walkin," as shots of the three women walking down an unpaved road in similar shoes are layered on top of each other, indicating parallel experiences (Figure 10). The camera then captures a close-up of the wind blowing gravel hard against Hall's bare calves.



Figure 10: The juxtaposition of all three band members walking in gravel in similar shoes. Screenshot from "Gravel in My Shoe" video on YouTube.

In the following scene, the husband is shown sitting in an armchair, looking at what is presumably an unpictured television. Laura brings the husband a beer as the lyrics “staring at your acne scars/while you’re watching NASCAR/never get your own beer/make me feel so dang queer” accompany the scene. Ramona is then shown standing in front of a full clothesline, boredly singing “fed up, fed up/when you gonna shape up/I give up, I give up/he's never gonna change.” The chorus enters, and the three band members are shown in a muddy field, standing behind their husbands (i.e., a triplicated image of the same man), who are seated (Figure 11).



Figure 11: The three band members standing in an open field behind their husbands who are holding a beer and sitting down, and all played by the same actor. Screenshot from “Gravel” video on YouTube.

Leslie is then shown lying in bed with her husband. She is petting his beard affectionately while he disinterestedly stares at the ceiling. She sings, “never thought I could live without one/always told me I was worthless and no fun/but without my puppy lovin’/now he’ll have to learn the oven.” Hall then sings about the prospect of going online to find a different man who treats her better over a montage of all the wives doing their respective chores. All band members then reach a breaking point and stop doing their

chores; Laura throws a pile of wood to the ground, Leslie frustratedly tosses aside the lawn mower, and Ramona yanks all the clothes off the line and onto the ground. The chorus re-enters as the camera zooms into the image of one of the band members' shoes full of copious amounts of gravel being dumped to the ground. After putting her shoe back on with a new pep in her step, Hall and the LYs link arms and frolic down the road wearing new outfits that are more different from each other than what they were wearing before-- seemingly to point to a newly embraced individualism. The accompanying lyrics state that the subject moves to her own place, takes a job with the city, and begins dating online.

As we can see, Hall is clearly camping a complacent heteronormative relationship, rescuing the rural Midwestern housewife into a new life at the end. Her portrayal of this relationship and its rural setting is very over-the-top, and draws on tropes regarding these relationships that we see on television. For example, the notion that the husband is a chubby, neglectful white guy with a beer in his hand in front of the television, always sitting and never pitching in on chores can be found in a multitude of sitcoms, including but not limited to *Roseanne*, *King of Queens*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. In such sitcoms, the wife is typically depicted as doing all the work of the home while her husband sits around, and Hall plays off that trope as well by showing all three band members doing laborious chores such as chopping the wood, mowing the lawn, and hanging laundry. Expressions such as Hall's frown when her husband refuses to wave back and Romana's overdone boredom as she stirs the pot are also over-the-top, as is the intense amount of gravel being poured from the shoe during the chorus (Figure 12). The visual sameness of the wives and the literal sameness of the husbands also hyperbolizes the boredom and normativity of

such relationships; the wives are somewhat different but essentially the same in dress and demeanor, and the husbands are all the same.



Figure 12: Copious amounts of gravel pouring from a shoe.
Screenshot from “Gravel in My Shoe” on YouTube.

In addition to camping heteronormativity in “Gravel,” Hall is also clearly camping Midwestern stereotypes. As mentioned, the visual setting is very rural (albeit not agricultural, as no corn is shown, despite Hall’s description saying “corn and cold”), and the music itself is very different from Hall’s standard dance- and rap-oriented music. While the music was still created using loops from GarageBand, in this song, Hall intentionally uses loops that contain folk and country aesthetics. For example, the sound of a ukulele accompanies the song. Although the instrument is Hawaiian, in recent years it started to be picked up by white indie folk and country artists (in both the US and the UK) such as Zoey Deschanel, Ingrid Michaelson, Stephin Merritt, and Taylor Swift. Further, the instrument has a history of being taken up by rock stars, including Eddie Vedder and George Harrison, who used it to portray some kind of “folk authenticity,” (Dolan 2010; Jacobson 2015). Some authors consider the ukulele an “everyman” instrument (Jacobson 2015), as its size and relative affordability make it more easily accessible in general, especially in light of the economic crash of the 2000s and the Great Depression (Thorne 2012). It was in this era of

recession-hit America that Hall wrote “Gravel,” in which she seemingly also uses the ukulele to create some kind of “folk” or “ordinary” aesthetic, which seems particularly apt for a video depicting unadorned, bored Midwest heteronormativity.

Hall also uses elements from country music to support the ordinariness and rurality of her video, particularly by imitating yodeling. While Hall sings the majority of the verses around G3 and in a chest voice, the chorus hops a seventh from G3 to F4 (Figure 13), causing Hall to move from her chest voice to her head voice. Although her singing does not have the glottal stop characteristic of country yodeling, the switching of registers, the large intervals, and the vocables (Figure 14) create an impression of yodeling even if Hall is not employing standard yodeling techniques.

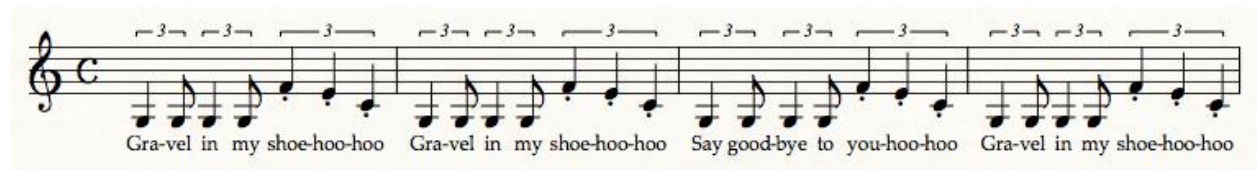


Figure 13: The chorus to “Gravel In My Shoe,” wherein Hall jumps a seventh and switches registers, resembling the vocal break common in yodeling. Transcription by author.



Figure 14: Hall uses vocables in her head voice, again mimicking yodeling. Transcription by author.

Hall’s use of an instrument and vocal technique from genres commonly associated with rural whites and the “common man,” particularly when combined with the visual setting of a rural area, make clear that she is camping the rural ordinariness with which the Midwest is often represented. In camping these Midwestern stereotypes, Hall challenges stereotypes of the region as complacent, stuck in the past, and exclusively rural by

portraying such stereotypes as over-the-top and ridiculous. Further, the narrative of “Gravel” centers the rural Midwestern housewife and allows her to be the heroine of her own story. That there is some visual difference between the wives (aka the band members) and no difference between the husbands positions the Midwestern housewife as more than “just” a forgotten woman in a heteropatriarchal situation, and that is further exemplified by the wives getting fed up and escaping to create a new life for themselves.

The gender dynamics of “Gravel” indicate that Hall is playing up and pushing against the association of complacent heteropatriarchy with the Midwest. The entirety of the “Gravel” video analogizes the gravel of the unpaved road with the quotidian misery of heteropatriarchal marriage. This metaphor of gravel in a shoe relays the annoying abundance of something seemingly quotidian, yet all-consuming. Many YouTube responses to Hall’s “Gravel” made note of the video’s feminist politics. For example, WhiteTrashPeg wrote in 2014, “Miss Hall, you are the voice of the mistreated Midwestern farm wife. This actually made me cry a little, because I’ve had so many gals like this in my family tree. And they said you were all just glitz and club music...” User goodtimesagogo wrote similarly about how “Gravel” can speak to rural American wives, stating “oh my god IOWA...leslie your songwriting is hilarious and brilliant and i think ‘gravel in my shoe’ could be an anthem for farmer’s wives across rural america.” Other users even spoke to how “Gravel” empowered them personally. For example, user joyann1, wrote “I feel extremely empowered after watching this video. It gave me the courage and power to finally step away from my loveless marriage to a humongous bastard of a man who wouldn’t be able to find a clitoris if his life depended on it. You go girls!” Comments such as these demonstrate

that Hall's work not only portrays a new life for the rural Midwestern housewife, but that this portrayal has a real impact on some viewers' actual lives.

In addition to commenting on the feminism of "Gravel," other users wrote about the general Midwesternness of the video. For example, user Travis Allen Marler wrote, "This is the most Midwestern thing I've ever seen" and Detroit5000 said "You make the midwest awesome!!!! This is total midwest and inner Canada and Northern Ontario! I love you!!" One user, derty QWERTY, was unable to make sense of the video due to its Midwesternness and commented disparagingly about it, stating "This must be some Iowa corn pickers thing. Super dumb, makes no sense. Not hating, just telling the common sense facts about this video." However denigrating derty QWERTY's comment may be, the fact that the user refers to it as an "Iowa corn pickers thing" makes an association with Iowa and corn, just as Hall's video caption does, speaking again to general stereotypes of the Midwest.

Churn the Butter

As mentioned, Hall's work does not commonly portray these stereotypes of Midwestern plainness specifically, and "Gravel" is the only music video in which she appears in this unadorned fashion. However, some of Hall's lesser known songs revisit these themes of rurality and plainness, particularly on her 2010 album "Back2Back Palz," the album upon which "Gravel" appears. Hall spoke of her incorporations of this rurality in an interview with *Ames Progressive*. She states: "Little prom queen wannabe turned into look-at-me-in-my-gem-sweaters turned into the diva get-dressed-up-in-spandex-tight-and-get-sweaty-for-the-crowd, which is now changing into Iowa peasant woman" (Logsdon 2009). An example of this "Iowa peasant woman" character is the song "Churn the Butter," which, like "Gravel," musically defies the dance-and rap-oriented styles common in Hall's

work. “Churn” is accompanied by GarageBand loops of acoustic guitar and rattles, as well as the occasional steel guitar twang (an instrument that, oddly enough, is also of Hawaiian origin, although I think in this case Hall is using it solely for its twang, which connects her music to the use of steel guitar in country and blues). The lyrics of “Churn” clearly describe small-town rural activities; as the title suggests, the entire chorus is centered around churning butter, as the phrase “I gotta churn the butter, (churn, churn, churn, churn)” is repeated three times, followed by the words, “Cuz' that's what me and momma do/for money on the plains.” These lyrics paint an image of a poor rural family that acquires money through the pastoral activity of churning butter. Hall further describes crafting activities and crafted items when she sings, “When I finish your quilt I wanna/Wrap it 'round Billy McAlister.” She also states that she is wearing a homemade dress to the county dance. These lyrics again paint a picture of small-town American living in their discussion of homemade goods and local events.

“Churn” describes not only rural activities, but activities associated with the past as well. While there are likely still people who churn their own butter and make their own dresses, that is no longer the common American experience. The type of scene that “Churn” sets is thus an historical one. In addition to the rural activities Hall sings about, she also describes going to a “picture show,” a term rarely used contemporarily, having been replaced by the terms “movie” or “film” long ago. In these ways, Hall’s song brings up images of a bucolic past associated with the Midwest, but she sings through these images campily. That “Churn,” like all the rest of Hall’s work, was created in the Apple program GarageBand only enhances the campiness of it, as modern technology is being utilized to create music about the past that sounds like it is from the past, or at least from “the

country,” which is often associated with the past. This anachronism contributes to the overall campiness of the seemingly subdued or unmarked Midwest picture that Hall paints. According to Robertson, anachronism is an integral aspect of camp. She writes: “At the same time that camp recoups stereotypes, it also displaces them by historicizing them and recoding them according to contemporary tastes and needs. Camp needs, then, to be considered as a mode of productive anachronism, a form of recycling” (Robertson: 142). Hall’s recycling of gem sweaters demonstrates this recoding, as she reuses gem sweaters in order to empower Midwestern femininity in the here and now.

In addition to making rurality campy through anachronism, Hall also camps rurality by using rural topics as double entendres. For example, in the tender acoustic song “Dust Lover” (also from Back2BackPalz), the words “dirt” and “dust” have sexual connotations. Hall sings: “Dust lover, dust lover/Dust in the wind, dust in the wind/I met my lover in the school house/I was wearing a white blouse/I was clean like a teen should be/Yearning for life and loveliness/And he turned my blouse brown/And we caressed to the touch of the moonlight rocker.” White being a symbol of innocence, the notion of it becoming dirty “to the touch of the moonlight rocker” is clearly a double entendre for lost virginity. Although lyrics such as “So when I drive by/A dusty pasture...It takes me back to my dirty lover” and the slow acoustic guitar accompaniment allow these double entendres to hide behind what sounds like a sweet folk tune, the lyrics reveal a sexualization of rural life--a life which is also placed in the past by words such as “school house.”

Another song set in a rural context that employs double entendre is Hall’s “Moving Out of Iowa,” also off of Back2BackPalz. While the musical aesthetics of “Moving” are not acoustic or associated with rurality like Hall’s indie folk and country aesthetics mentioned

earlier, the rural associations with Iowa are clear in the lyrics. It is almost as if in the act of moving out of Iowa, Hall is moving away from the country or folksy aesthetics commonly associated with rurality. Instead of such aesthetics, the music is comprised of Hall's vocals, accompanied by a simple, funky ascending bass riff with dance-inspired drumbeats in the background. "Moving" describes the reasons why Hall is leaving Iowa, saying that the location failed her in the love department: "I-O-W-A/failed me so I'm movin' away/Where you get them farm hands to work my earth (Tell me, Tell me)/Where you get that tractor with length and girth (Tell me please!)/ I'm not gon' settle for soy and green beans/There's no love in Iowa for me so I'm changing scenes." With lyrics such as "hands to work my earth" and "tractor with length and girth" Hall is clearly using elements of farm living as double entendres. The topic of "Moving" relates to "Gravel" not only through its rural setting, but also through the association of rurality with failed love; in both cases, the lyrical subject moves from her rural setting to find love elsewhere, and a city specifically, in the case of "Gravel."

Queen of the Gems

As in "Moving," not all of Hall's anachronistic songs are accompanied by the folksy aesthetics often associated with rurality. What's more, not all of Hall's anachronisms are steeped in elements of agricultural living such as crops, tractors, and homemade butter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hall's initial internet popularity revolved around the gem sweater, and so do many of her songs. In Hall's work, the gem sweater appears as a symbol of blue-collar Midwestern femininity. The sheer abundance of fake gems on Hall's sweaters hints at an underlying desire to compensate for a lower socioeconomic class in both flash and abundance, and the act of crafting suggests the desire to create clothing that

is inexpensive. This focus on crafting was apt for the time period, as the 2008 economic crash gave way to an upswing in an American focus on crafting.

Hall's focus on crafting and tacky femininity also connects to camp in their similarities to drag queens, for whom the ability to create one's own costumes is often necessary, and for whom the camping of femininity is widespread. Similar to drag queens, Leslie Hall shows the performativity of femininity through her over-the-top feminine appearance and exaggerated performance tactic--her large hair, extreme makeup, and flashy costumes could easily be found on a drag queen. And as I will discuss in the following chapter, these connections between Hall and drag have been well recognized by queens in various settings, as many have posted impersonation videos of Hall's work.

Drag queen performances run the gamut from stand-alone impersonations of specific female stars (often gay icons such as Liza Minelli) to personas developed by the performer that may or may not be influenced by or centered around specific stars. Hall falls into the latter category, as she has developed her own persona. Unlike most drag queens, who typically create a drag name for themselves (e.g., Jinkx Monsoon or Lady Bunny), Hall performs under her real name, but as I discussed earlier, the character of "Leslie Hall" is distinct (albeit necessarily connected to) from Leslie Hall the person. Another component of Hall's shtick that differs from most drag queens is that she writes her own music, whereas the most prominent mode of drag queen performance is lip syncing to music by mainstream stars.

In addition to her aesthetic connections to drag, Hall's drag persona is also directly influenced by specific drag queens. For example, her makeup is very similar to that of Divine, a drag actor who starred in the majority of John Waters' films, such as *Pink*

Flamingos, *Female Trouble*, and *Hairspray*, and served as inspiration for the Disney character Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (Milstead, Heffernan, and Yeager, 2001). Both Hall and Ursula share Divine's characteristic blue eyeshadow (Figure 15) that reaches, at minimum, up to their eyebrows. Not only does Hall confirm Waters' influence on her work, but it is evident when comparing their work. While a full-scale comparison is outside the scope of this chapter, the underlying theme to the majority of Waters' films is making fun of constructions of celebrity and femininity through trashy, grotesque, fat feminine characters' efforts to become famous. As we have seen in the previous chapter's discussion of Hall's exaggerative performance of celebrity and in this chapter's discussion of the way she camps various femininities, these connections between Hall and Waters are both obvious and intentional. However, a couple of major differences exist between them. Firstly, Waters' stories always occur in Baltimore, where he and Divine grew up, so his work does not involve the camping of Midwestern stereotypes as Hall's does. Additionally, the blue collar femininity Waters depicts is more "trashy" than tacky, as that was his aim in developing the trash genre, whereas Hall's gem sweaters are more gaudy or kitschy, and far less risqué. Furthermore, her grotesqueness (which I will discuss in chapter four) is far less disgusting and more appropriate for children, as evidenced by her having a large youth audience. By contrast, something Waters is famous for is his extreme gross-out scene in *Pink Flamingos*, wherein Divine is seen eating fresh canine fecal matter.

Drag queens aside, Hall's Midwestern femininity is also obviously influenced by a handful of Midwestern female television characters such as Roseanne Conner of the television show *Roseanne*, which was set in a fictional town in Illinois and is centered around the blue-collar Conner family, of which Roseanne is the brassy matriarch. The

connection between Hall and Roseanne is made explicit in the song lyrics of “Hydrate Jirate,” where Hall sings “turn the TV up ‘cause *Roseanne* is on.” Additionally, during Hall’s 2014 “Songs in the Key of Gold” tour, she played a video as a teaser to her entrance wherein she plays Roseanne and her backup musicians (the LYs) play Roseanne’s daughters. In addition to Roseanne, Hall’s makeup and tacky clothing also closely resembles that of the character Mimi Bobeck from *The Drew Carey Show* (Figure 16). Although Hall has never mentioned Mimi as an influence, their styles of femininity are fairly similar, as Mimi is vulgar and bossy, just as Hall and Roseanne are.



Figure 15: The drag queen Divine in the John Waters film *Pink Flamingos*, wearing even more over-the-top eyeshadow than Leslie Hall, who claims Divine as an inspiration. Photo courtesy of flickr user Craig Duffy.



Figure 16: Mimi Bobeck from *The Drew Carey Show*, whose eyeshadow and tacky clothing are very Leslie Hall. Photo courtesy of The Drew Carey Show Wiki.

Hall's tacky femininity is exemplified by the gem sweater--a mainstay of her work and an illustration of the stereotypes about Midwesterners as having "low" taste and therefore being aesthetically undiscerning (Johnson 2008). Hall first spoke publicly about the significance of gem sweaters when she appeared on the television show *Unscrewed with Martin Sargent* in November 2004. *Unscrewed* typically focused on strange Internet content, so Hall's recently gained popularity from her "Gallery of Glamore" made her an apt choice (especially since, as discussed in the previous chapter, many see Hall's work as part of the "weird part of the internet"). During the episode, Martin asked Hall how she came to be a gem sweater collector, and Hall tells the story of how she discovered gem sweaters initially. She also spoke to the plight of the gem sweater--an undervalued and forgotten item tossed aside in a thrift store bin. She stated:

Collecting gem sweaters to me is a personal love and a personal gift I wanna give back to the world...Let me tell you a little story about how this all came together...I'm in high school and no one is asking me out, no one wants to go with me to the dances. I look into myself and I say, 'how can I get this done?' I go to the Goodwill, I'm digging through sweaters, I'm digging for the right one, and a sparkling gem caught my eye..I think, "people are throwing them away, they're giving them away, they're being neglected and forgotten." And my, what I'm trying to do is bring them back.

On *Unscrewed*, Hall positioned herself as the rescuer of gem sweaters, able to recognize their beauty and revive them for the general population through her museum and online gallery.

At the same time, Hall spoke to the gem sweater's ability to rescue her in return. When she discussed the lonely time in her life during which she started collecting, she essentially said that she found the neglected, forgotten sweaters at a time when she herself was feeling neglected and forgotten. Additionally, she stated that her gem sweater

collecting was a gift she wanted to give back to the world, as if to say that appreciation for gem sweaters or the recognizing of their power was something that the world needed--a service she was doing for the world. Hall's revival of gem sweater appreciation not only brings back the tossed-aside clothing of Midwestern moms past, but it attempts to bring renewed value to the labor of crafting that created those gem sweaters in the first place.

In another video entitled "How To Make a Gem Sweater," hosted by ThreadBanger, a YouTube channel that claims to curate "the best How-to, Crafting and DIY videos on YouTube," Hall positions herself as gem sweater historian. She repeats the story about initially happening upon the gem sweater at a thrift store and elaborates on what happened afterward: "I first discovered gem sweater at a thrift store, looking for something to wear to a dance. I went online because I wanted to buy another one, and there was no information, there was no title, no history, no story written. And that's when I discovered that I could be the storyteller, the lady with the words..." By situating herself as the historian of gem sweaters, Hall not only positions herself as an authority on the matter, but she situates gem sweaters as something important enough to deserve a spot in history. Further, by "telling the story" about gem sweaters, not only do the sweaters themselves become more significant, but the labor that initially created them and the people that wore them do as well.

Hall's revival of the gem sweaters is camp at its finest. Not only is Hall's standard performance of exaggerated femininity associated with camp, but her videos are campy in a temporal sense as well. As Andrew Ross asserts, camp retrieves what was initially excluded from high culture, and liberates objects and discourses of the past. He writes:

For the camp liberator...history's waste matter becomes all too available as a 'ragbag,' not drenched with tawdriness by the mock-heroism of Waste Land irony,

but irradiated, this time around, with the glamor of resurrection. In liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect, camp generates its own kind of economy. Camp, in this respect, is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor* (151, emphasis in original).

Hall's "Gallery of Glamore" exemplifies this "glamor of resurrection." Indeed, Hall "rescues" gem sweaters from the bargain bin of a thrift store, has her picture taken posing in each one, gives each one a name (e.g., "Olympic Medallian"), and displays them in her mobile gem sweater museum and online for all to see. Giving each sweater special treatment and hanging them in a museum awards each sweater a greater significance. Such a process rescues the sweaters from having been tossed aside and forgotten, and displays them in the same way high art is displayed.

In addition to Hall's resurrection of the forgotten feminine labor of crafting, Hall's recycling of gem sweaters is camp in that, according to Sontag, camp prizes the old-fashioned or out-of-date. She writes:

Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility...What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic...things are campy, not when they become old--but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of being frustrated by, the failure of the attempt (Sontag: 8).

The gem sweater is a good example of Sontag's theory, as gem sweaters were originally the banal fashions of blue-collar moms such as Roseanne (Figures 17 and 18), and could be considered a failure to fully embody glamour, an overcompensation for the real jewels one cannot afford, a "tacky" object. However, now that the 1980s and 90s have passed, we have become "less involved" with gem sweaters, and can enjoy their initial failure through Hall's campy collecting and displaying.

One of Hall's songs has also told the story of Hall rescuing the sweaters. Strangely enough, this song has gone by three different titles on different albums; it appeared on

YouTube in 2006 as “Gold Pants Lullaby,” on Hall’s 2006 album *Doorman’s Daughter* as “Mother Gem Lullaby,” and on the 2013 Titus Jones remix album *Songs in the Key of Gold* as “Gem Sweater Lullaby.” The opening lyrics to the song discuss this notion that Hall is the rescuer of gem sweaters: “like saving babies from a burning building so tenderly/I rescue preserve and reserve the right to let them shimmer so graciously.” Hall’s lyrics here demonstrate how she is reviving the sweaters, even giving them “the right to...shimmer.” Further, the title “Mother Gem Lullaby” and the act of singing a lullaby position Hall as having a maternal relationship to the gem sweaters. This maternal relationship seems to extend to her fans, who refer to her as “Mother Gem” and wear gem sweaters in her honor, much like Lady Gaga refers to herself as “Mother Monster” and her fans as “little monsters” (which I will discuss further in the next chapter). The later lyrics of the same song further establish this maternal relationship: “look at all the sweaters that came out to see me tonight/I wanna blast them with my jams then tuck them in good night.” By considering herself the mother of the gems (in literal and fan forms), Hall is positioning herself as a “Midwestern Mom,” not only by wearing the fashions of Midwestern moms past, but also by establishing a maternal relationship with these Midwestern objects in general.



Figure 17: Roseanne wears not only a bejeweled sweater in Season 7, Episode 9, but a sweater covered in faux jewelry! Photo courtesy of tumblr user thirlanddelaware.



Figure 18: Roseanne wears a Queen of Hearts gem sweater at a Las Vegas casino in Season 4 Episode 8. Photo courtesy of tumblr user thirlanddelaware.

In addition to demonstrating a familial relationship between Hall and the gem sweaters, some of Hall's songs discuss the art of making gem sweaters, adding to their revaluing by over-dramatizing the crafting process. The most popular of these is "Craft Talk," the video for which was released in March 2009, almost a year before *Back2BackPalz*--the album upon which it appears--was released. The video opens with a

close-up of Hall's fingers haphazardly pressing buttons on a corded landline telephone that sits atop a tablecloth of cat faces. Hall states: "please send a representative. I have just made the world's largest gem sweater in the wooorld," after which the camera does a close-up of Hall's exaggerated smile amidst fuchsia lipstick.

A caption that reads "20 minutes earlier" appears, and is followed by a scene wherein Hall is sitting in a chair snacking while wearing a black gem sweater with tight gold pants. The LYs move a crafting table into the room, and they and Hall begin to draft the blueprints for a gem sweater upon it. Hall sings and speaks the lyrics: "You sure lookin' crafty (crafty, crafty)/You can make a raft out of pencils and foam/You sure lookin' happy (happy, happy)/Cuz you make it snappy and not very crappy" while the image switches back and forth between the devising of the gem sweater and close-ups of Hall's face, wherein she looks straight at the camera, her expression intensely flirtatious to the degree of being deliberately creepy. Hall and the LYs then hold up the large piece of paper upon which they have been drawing. The back of it is bright pink, and the camera zooms in on it so that it covers the entire screen, after which it is transformed into a computer-generated transition, breaking into four triangles and bringing the viewer into the next scene. Such a transition connects the DIY crafting activities shown in the video to the obvious DIYness of the video itself.

The following scene depicts Hall and the LYs stylistically walking through the snow into a craft store, which is replete with yarn of various wraps and colors. The three jump and dance around the store like witches around a caldron, exaggeratedly peer at the yarn. After filling a large basket with yarn that Hall then holds up in the air while cheering, Hall sings "Now make it, make it, make it, make it/Faster, faster, faster, faster/Work through the

pain/work it through the pain,” lyrics that resemble the words one would hear in an exercise video or class (though again, one could argue that these lyrics sound somewhat sexual), exaggerating the strenuousness of crafting. The three then dance while waiting as the cashier rings up their purchase. This over-the-top portrayal of crafting camps Midwesternness in new and different ways; by positioning crafting as an activity that can cause someone to work up a sweat (from exertion, sexual or otherwise) or cause pain, Hall exaggerates both crafting’s athleticism and its importance. Indeed, in “Craft Talk,” even the act of purchasing crafting materials is over the top, given that the band members dance around the store while making choices and checking out.

“Craft Talk” next transitions by zooming into and breaking away from a framed picture of kittens on the wall of the crafting room. Hall and the LYs are now back in the crafting room, the LYs knitting as Hall dances around the room, at times pelvic thrusting (while standing or sitting) and peering over the LYs to examine their work and encourage their productivity. The LYs eventually shift from knitting the sweater to sewing giant pink and gold sequins on it as Hall looks on with approval.

We next see Hall and the LYs dancing outside in the snow, Hall still in her gem sweater and gold pants, the LYs now donning marching band-esque outfits, one holding a trumpet and the other a baton. Behind them is a large truck from which their newly crafted gigantic gem sweater is hanging. In its completion, we discover that the gem sweater is almost identical to that which Hall is wearing. The gem sweater is taking up the majority of the background of the shot. It is held high in the air and flaps in the wind, as if it were a very large flag. Soon, the representative Hall telephoned at the beginning of the video comes to inspect the gem sweater. He shakes Hall’s hand in approval as the LYs continue

dancing in the background. The gem sweater falls off its holder on one side and Leslie runs off, leaving the LYs posed there, holding the sweater up in the air. The video comes to an end with a close-up of a certificate acknowledging Hall and the LYs' sweater as the "World's Largest Gem Sweater." The camera then moves up to Hall (who is holding the certificate), closing in on her grimacing wink.

Hall employs the description of crafting activities as double entendres with lyrics such as "scratch me with your hot designs/Dribble me in neon lines/Use that walkie-talkie/and talk to me some crafts" sexualize crafting just as she sexualizes rurality in "Dirt Lover." These double entendres, in addition to Hall's pelvic thrusting throughout the video, attribute campy sexual excess to the feminine Midwestern labor of crafting. Additionally, the urgency with which Hall calls the representative and the notion that a "world's largest gem sweater" award exists situate the gem sweater as something of great significance. Hall's winning of this award, as well as the way that she centers herself as the crafting project manager or boss, position Hall as having great power and authority, again harkening back to Ross' idea that camp recreates the surplus value of forgotten forms of labor. Crafting, and gem sweaters in particular, are given great power through Hall's camp. In so doing, the gem sweater, as a symbol of Midwestern femininity, is granted sexual prowess and appeal, as well as an imagined world of its own power.

Another song that demonstrates the centrality of the gem sweater in Hall's work, as well as an imagined significant degree of power for her and the sweaters, is the synthpop song "Gem Sweater" off of *Door Man's Daughter* (2006). The chorus to this song features high, dissonant notes that swoop up and down on the words "gem sweater," creating an eerie aesthetic. It is clear that Hall meant for the aesthetic of "Gem Sweater" to be

somewhat ghostly, as the lyrics discuss mind control and Hall and the sweaters' ability to strike fear into the hearts of all. For example, Hall sings "with these shoulder pads/I have the strength/to destroy villages, homes, and crops!/they're coming back (say what, say what?!)/they want your babies (junior gems, junior gems!)/put them on (what, what?!)/you lovely lady!" These lyrics depict gem sweaters as haunting and predatory, as if they are the antagonist(s) of a horror film. Hall also opens the song by singing about her own authority: "keeper of the gems, I am/with the power to rock your body as i jam/can you feel me flowing inside your skull?/I have a razor ball of lightning striking your mind/flowing at all times/wear your.../GEM SWEATER (here to dominate your mind!)." These lyrics not only hyperbolize the seriousness of gem sweaters, allotting them the power of lightning and "to rock your body." Additionally, the domineering voice of the gem sweater awards the Midwestern mom with even more power--including the power to scare.

In addition to Midwestern femininity manifest through the gem sweater, Hall also camps Midwestern femininity by describing herself as "glamorous" in several songs. For example, in "Midwest Diva," Hall aligns herself with pop divas such as Shania Twain and Jennifer Lopez (again, showing the discrepancies between mainstream celebrities and herself, as discussed previously): "Got my money rolled tight as a cinnamon roll/And let my J-Lo booty bounce low real low/If Shania were here she'd say let's go girls...Not from the East, not from the West/Girls in the middle that rock the best." Here, she lends Midwestern "girls" authority both by aligning herself with pop divas (i.e., those that succeed at femininity) and asserting that Midwestern girls "rock the best."

While Hall she compares herself to pop divas, she also describes herself doing small-town activities and compares her body to food (e.g., cinnamon roll) -- neither of which is conventionally glamorous. She raps, "I stole kisses from you momma at the barber shop (what?!)/I stole kisses from you pappa at the soccer shop (pappa no!)" and "Take me on a ride/A ride down to the mall/Take me in the mall/so I can try on pretty things." That Hall presents herself as unable to see the differences between the femininity of J-Lo and Shania on the one hand and Midwestern, mall-shopping soccer moms on the other is an indicator of the failed femininity she camps. This campy "failing" of femininity is a deliberate reimagining of the social order that places Midwestern femininity at the top. She even states in the ThreadBanger video about gem sweaters, "Definitely my message is simple: you should be yourself because peasant people, streetwalkers, can become celebrities if you remain true to yourself, put it on YouTube, keep it clean...There's plenty of star power even if you are freakishly ghoulish and unlovable." Here, Hall acknowledges her own ghoulishness, and encourages other "others" to become famous, and uses the YouTube "anyone can be a star" or "broadcast yourself" ideology discussed in the previous chapter. By saying "peasant people" and "streetwalkers" together in one sentence, Hall is describing the types of femininity she camps--tacky, white, blue-collar, and Midwestern.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the multiple Midwestern femininities that Hall camps. By examining stereotypes of the region as rural and plain but also tacky and tasteless, I showed that Hall performs these stereotypes in order to challenge and empower them. Further, as camp's purpose is to call attention to and make fun of social constructions of all kinds, I demonstrated that camp can include not only over-the-top flashy femininity, but

exaggerative plainness as well. In addition, with camp's connection to drag and queer culture, Hall's Midwest camp brings queerness to the cornfield—a place from which queerness is often thought to be absent.

"I...took a trip out to California last week, where I held some productive bilateral talks with your leader, Lady Gaga." - President Barack Obama, Human Rights Campaign 2011 Annual Dinner

Chapter Three. Somewhere Over the Cornfield: Leslie Hall's Midwestern Gay Iconicity

As we saw in the previous chapter, Hall camps both tacky and plain Midwestern femininities. This chapter examines Hall's depictions of queerness in rural areas, and particularly how she queers the Midwest. I discuss the role of gay icons in American queer culture, politics, and community building, and consider Hall's deliberate positioning of herself in that lineage. Drawing from media interviews with Hall regarding her queer fan community, I situate Hall as a gay icon and consider the similarities and differences between her and other gay icons. Further, I show the significance of Hall having found fame online instead of through the mainstream music or film industries.

Drawing on Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* (1986) and Whiteley's *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006), I discuss the relationship between ordinariness and glamour, positing that there is something queer in the discrepancy between or overlap of the two. I connect the first chapter's discussion of YouTube's role in bringing the quotidian into the public sphere and chapter two's analysis of Hall's Midwestern camp, asserting that Hall utilizes the perceived ordinariness of both YouTube and the Midwest to turn the concept of queer glamor on its head. That is, instead of demonstrating queerness solely through glamor and excess, Hall exploits the perceived discrepancy between excess and ordinariness by demonstrating how they can be the same.

Utilizing social geography scholarship on non-urban queerness, I analyze the music videos for Hall's songs "How We Go Out" (2008) and "Your [sic] Not Taken" (2011), pointing to the ways that Hall aligns the quotidian, the queer, and the glamorous. I also compare *Married in Spandex*—a documentary that gives an inside look into Hall's gay marriage enterprise—with the thirty-three couple wedding at the 2014 Grammys. I argue that, in juxtaposing rural ordinariness with glamour and positioning Iowa as a queer destination for a wedding, Hall gives voice to the Midwestern queer.

From "Are You a Friend of Dorothy" to Political Advocacy

Beginning in the nineteenth century with gay male appreciation for operatic prima donnas, gay icons have historically been entertainers of various kinds, shifting from opera to film to pop music. As the United States was becoming fascinated with the burgeoning star system in the 1920s and 30s, queer culture found icons in Hollywood divas such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Scholars such as Daniel Harris (1997), John Clum (1999), and Brett Abrams (2004) have discussed the character and aesthetic qualities that led queers to iconize such stars. They show that the queer relationship to Hollywood films and their divas was significantly different than the relationship between heterosexual audiences and Hollywood stars because those stars played a significant role in the development of queer communities and liberatory politics. Note that I am using the word "queer" to refer to a wide range of sexual identities. Although I use the term "gay icon" because that is the term commonly used by scholars and popular culture, my aim in referring to queer communities or identities as such is to leave space for many types of people to relate to these artists or consider them icons.

Daniel Harris writes about the political and psychological functions of gay icons in film; the film diva represented the “almost universal experience of ostracism and insecurity,” and gay men exploited Hollywood grandeur to elevate themselves from antagonistic surroundings and signal membership in “a secret society of upper-class aesthetics” (Harris 1997: 10), laying the ground for the association between queers and “good taste.” Similarly, Abrams asserted that the Hollywood diva provided gay men with a surrogate for their own experience—a femme fatale whose glamour and control over men allowed her to create triumph out of struggle. He writes that Bette Davis and Joan Crawford and other such stars played characters who used satire and “bitchiness” to control circumstances, “their feminine wiles enabling them to triumph while winning the man to their side” (Abrams 2004: 76). These stars became proxies for many gay men, who could identify with the idea of asserting feminine power to win over desirable men (Ibid.).

John Clum asserts that drag impersonations of gay icons reinforce gay icons’ position as proxy. Drawing on Harris, Clum argues that drag queens can serve as an intermediary between queer fan and diva icon, embodying the diva for an audience and bringing her further into community spaces (Clum 1999: 137). While the idea that gay men gravitate toward female divas because they resonate with the divas’ femininities seems like a simple and somewhat superficial assumption to make, divas serve as a representation of what some refer to as the “gay sensibility” (Bronski 1984; Bergman 1993; Harris 1997). This sensibility can also be explained as a certain type of gay male masculinity that favors campy glamour, triumph over struggle, and domination over straight men.

Although the notion of a universal sensibility is problematic and homogenizing because of the existence of many queer subcultures with wide ranges of gender expression

and identification, I speculate that the role gay icons played in structuring community prior to the 1969 Stonewall riots¹ made a particular kind of gay sensibility more likely. That is, because performances by gay icons created a space for queers to create community and because Hollywood played a key role in the development of queer subjectivities at the time, perhaps there was a higher likelihood of a more unified gay identity simply because of the limited scripts and experiences available in the mainstream. Further, considering the characteristics associated with a purported gay sensibility is useful in being able to find unifying or common themes between gay iconicity throughout time. That said, it is also important to consider that scholarly texts detailing the history of gay iconicity are largely if not exclusively detailing a history of *white* gay icons, which could lead to an overdeveloped narrative of unity across gay culture, but because campy glamour and the stereotypical association of “good taste” with the gay male community is part of what is significant in considering Hall’s iconicity, this history is still necessary in my analysis.

A Star is Born

Although gay icons have spanned many genres and mediums, there is likely no more significant an icon than Judy Garland (1922-1969). With the rise of the Hollywood musical in the 1950s and 1960s, Garland came to be considered an icon both for her androgynous or plain girl-next-door film roles (e.g., *Wizard of Oz* [1939] and *A Star Is Born* [1954]) as well as her often-tumultuous personal life. Dyer discusses that the significant discrepancy between the ordinariness of Garland’s film roles and her dramatic personal life was a major

¹ This connection has been made because the June 28, 1969 “Stonewall Riots”—protests by the patrons of the Greenwich Village queer bar the Stonewall Inn against ongoing police brutality--have become “mythologized as the origin of the gay liberation movement.” (See Stryker 2008: 82).

reason for her popularity among queers, as that discrepancy was analogous or at least relatable to the gay experience. He writes:

The ordinariness is a starting point because, like Judy Garland gay men are brought up to be ordinary. One is not brought up gay; on the contrary; everything in the culture seems to work against it. Had Garland remained an image of ordinary normality...she would not have been so available as a gay icon. It was the fact, as became clear after 1950, that she was not after all the ordinary girl she appeared to be that suggested a relationship to ordinariness homologous with that of gay identity. To turn out not-ordinary after being saturated with the values of ordinariness structures Garland's career and the standard gay biography alike (Dyer: 153).

Some of the songs for which Garland was most popular reinforced the relatability of her turbulent life in spite of (or perhaps because of) MGM-constructed ordinariness. Abrams states that "Over the Rainbow" and "The Man that Got Away" (from *The Wizard of Oz* and *A Star is Born*, respectively) summarized queer individuals' "hopes and disappointments," and that the contrast between her ordinary roles and her troubles and triumphs of the middle and later years of her career felt representative of the queer experience for many (Abrams: 77).

Lloyd Whitesell (2006) further discusses the role of the ordinary in the musical genre, stating that it provides an important tension to glamour and that it is a crucial component of fairy-tale musicals, which involves a passage from an ordinary world to a fantasy one. He writes that characters such as Maria in *Sound of Music* and Dorothy in *Wizard of Oz* are "presented as common, just like you and me," and this depiction of the characters' ordinariness provides contrast to their brush with glamour that allows the latter to feel more thrilling. Whitesell argues that this "interaction of ordinary and glam...can be an important source of narrative tensions" (Whitesell 2006: 27). This type of

tension will become important later in this chapter, when I discuss the ways that Hall puts ordinariness and glamour in tension in the same moment.

In addition to the queer relatability of Garland's "hopes and disappointments" and glamorous triumph over ordinariness, Garland's status as a significant gay icon also had a lot to do with the ways her shows created a space in which queers could meet and identify with each other. Pointing out that this diva worship was far more about the audience than the star herself, Harris writes that Judy Garland fandom "was an emphatic political assertion of ethnic camaraderie" (1997: 17). Harris' use of "ethnic" here means that these shows allowed a queer subculture to arise, and that these concerts themselves were an assertion of a collective identity similar to that of an ethnic group's. Hence, the space Garland's concerts created, in addition to her film roles and experiences, caused her to emerge as a leader for the gay community, and this fandom had far greater significance in the community than simple artist appreciation. Indeed, the iconicity of Judy Garland extended so far that it created somewhat of a secret code for the gay community and occasionally even a means through which individuals came to know they were gay. Abrams states that the question "are you a friend of Dorothy?" epitomizes the connection between "Garland's iconic status and LGBT people's ability to meet" each other (2004: 77). This question, used in the 1950s and 60s to ask whether someone was "in the 'gay' life" (Ibid.), indicates a deepened personal relationship between star and fans. The word "friend" here elevates both star and fan to confidant. As we will see later in this chapter, this deepened personal relationship appears several times in fan/icon relationships.

That the answer to the "friend of Dorothy" question indicated whether or not someone belonged to the gay community is an indication not only of Garland's popularity

among gay audiences, but also of the role that gay icons (and Garland in particular) have historically played in the creation and identification of gay culture. That is, the question “are you a friend of Dorothy” not only let gay people know whether another person was gay, but straight people as well. The legacy of this “friend of Dorothy” question continued long past Garland’s life. In the 1995 film *Clueless*, the character Murray says of Christian, another male character, “He’s a disco-dancing, Oscar Wilde-reading, Streisand ticket-holding friend of Dorothy, know what I’m saying?” This quote reinforces not only the association of Garland with queer subculture, but the role of music, art, and iconicity in the formation and perception of queer identities as well.

Although before her death Garland tried to “establish her teenage daughter, Liza Minnelli, as her successor” (Altman 1971: 154) and to boost Barbra Streisand’s career by featuring Streisand on her television show, the post-Stonewall era saw a decrease in the use of gay icons as a secret code and perhaps a decline in diva worship. Harris writes to this end, arguing that “because gay culture is becoming less closeted...the need to seal our furtive communal bond through the secret handshake of Hollywood trivia is disappearing” (Harris: 33). Harris goes on to say that liberation is reducing the need for “celebrity culture as a group marker” (Ibid.). That is, for Harris, because liberation allowed queer people to live more openly than before, they no longer needed to hide behind icons as a secret marker because new ways of recognizing and relating to one another began to arise.

While it may be true that gay icons became less of a “secret handshake” starting after the Stonewall riots of 1969 than they were previously, diva worship did not die but instead persisted in new ways. For example, because the 1970s introduced disco and increased the association of gay culture with nightclubs, gay iconicity became more

associated with pop music divas than with those from opera, theatre, or Hollywood films. The first of these pop icons were disco artists such as Donna Summer and the Village People in the 1970s, followed by other popular dance artists such as Cher, Madonna, and Cyndi Lauper in the 1980s and onward. Steve Gdula contends that gay iconicity shifted from suffering divas to empowered pop icons following Stonewall, and cites Madonna as one of the primary conduits for this change. He writes:

Madonna was a new kind of heroine for the diva-adoring gay masses. The tone of the torch songs that characterized the pre-disco era was long on suffering, short on self-worth. Madonna gave us a new kind of anthem, one in which we no longer had to be held hostage emotionally by anyone who spurned our advances. (Gdula 2005)

Thus, after Stonewall, gay iconicity saw a change in the kind of diva queers gravitated towards, most likely due to a new sense of empowerment that arose from the civil disobedience of Stonewall and the increased visibility of the LGBT people in general. In turn, the new focus on disco and dance music created a new activity through which gay iconicity became codified: the dance club. Just as Judy Garland concerts created gay spaces and reinforced the iconicity of certain divas, so did the dance club provide both geographic and sonic spaces wherein the community could unify and also be sonically “surrounded” by their icons.

Gay diva worship is thus still a meaningful and frequent form of queer world making. Brett Farmer, who writes in response to Harris, maintains this assertion as well, stating:

There can be little argument that the advent of gay liberation has had wide-ranging, radical impacts on queer identities and cultures, and I do not doubt that practices of diva worship have changed as a result, but it would be wrong, or at the very least unhelpful, to consign gay diva worship to the historical dustbin of pre-Stonewall obsolescence. Not only does it disregard the presence of diva worship in contemporary queer cultural productions...it also enforces a reductive reading of

gay cultures that ignores—indeed does not even allow for—historical persistences and continuities. (Farmer 2005: 173)

Here, Farmer not only echoes the notion that diva worship still exists in gay cultures contemporarily, but also raises a good point: that to disregard the practice of diva worship or ignore its existence also denies the possibility of historical continuities within queer culture.

Craig Jennex, who writes in response to an article in *The Atlantic* that claimed diva worship is shameful and over for gay culture, further critiques this notion that diva worship is unnecessary in the contemporary political climate. He asserts that particularly gay men from his generation have “categorically abandoned diva worship and consequently consider cross-gender fan identification a weakness” (Jennex 2013: 344). For Jennex, this notion that masculine identities connecting with or being based upon diva performance is somehow “weak” and should be eliminated from contemporary queer culture is problematic. He argues that this erasure is “misogynist, anti-queer, and perilously assimilationist” (Ibid). Here, Jennex asserts that the notion that cross-gender fan identification is weak and the subsequent abandonment of diva worship is based on the idea that femininity in general is weak and a challenge to conventional masculinity and is therefore misogynist and assimilationist. To call for the eradication of diva worship hence indicates an ignorance to contemporary queer lives, and serves to support patriarchal masculinity and the gender binary among queers and in general.

Not only does diva worship persist within queer culture, but one could argue that the relationship between gay icons and their fans has actually been strengthened in light of (at least perceived) political progress because gay icons often engage in political activism on behalf of their queer fans. Whereas only some divas of the past acknowledged their

queer audiences, many of the more contemporary gay heroines have served as activists and philanthropists for the LGBT community. For example, Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, and Lady Gaga have all engaged in AIDS activism. Gdula discusses how Madonna's support extended past the dance floor, as she became "an outspoken AIDS activist...promoting education and compassion over ignorance and intolerance" (Ibid). Such activism indicates a relationship beyond (albeit in addition to) a commercial exchange between fan and icon. To speak out in support of queer culture and communities well exceeds mere acceptance of queer fans; it makes a statement to the general public and opens a space for discourse.

Although AIDS activism is still carried out by the gay icons mentioned, as the perception of the disease as solely a homosexual one began to wane, these icons took up new causes such as marriage rights and anti-bullying, and also began to frequently and publicly express support for the gay community in general. For instance, Madonna was nearly sued by anti-LGBT groups in Russia for speaking in support of the LGBT people during her concert in St. Petersburg on August 9, 2012 (Huffington Post 2012). Lady Gaga created the "Born This Way" Foundation, which, according to its mission statement,

was founded in 2011 to foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated. The Foundation is dedicated to creating a safe community that helps connect young people with the skills and opportunities they need to build a kinder, braver world (Born This Way Foundation: n.d.).

"Born This Way" (2011) is also the title of one of Lady Gaga's most popular songs, the lyrics of which attempt to foster self-love among queers (and others). In particular, the lines "no matter gay, straight, or bi/Lesbian, transgendered life/I'm on the right track baby/I was born to survive" aim to provide the comforting notion that queerness is an indisputable birth-given fact.

Whether or not any of these stars have used their gay followings for their own benefit has been debated,² and whether or not a gay icon can truly advocate for all queers remains to be seen, many of these artists attempt to increase the visibility of queer political issues even if the community is not unified in their appreciation for those artists and their advocacy. I will later discuss how Leslie Hall also connects gay diva worship and political advocacy, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Shazam She's Glamorous

As we have seen thus far, gay icons have also been considered divas, and have ranged in craft (e.g., film, popular music) and in reasons for connection with queers (e.g., tumultuous lives, empowerment). Leslie Hall also falls into the diva camp (pun fully intended), as she describes herself as a diva in several contexts, including in the song “Midwest Diva” that I analyzed in the previous chapter. Not only does this song refer to Hall as a diva, but a “Midwest Diva” (2008) specifically, which is a term she repeats in many contexts. For example, Hall’s Twitter handle is @midwestdiva and the section of her website where she sells her “stretchy pants” refers to her as a “Midwest Diva” as well, and even calls the pants “Midwest Diva Stretchy Pants” (Leslie Hall, n.d.). Further, the tagline for the pants is “Made In Iowa. Built By A Diva” (Figure 19). This language not only imbues both Hall and the stretchy pants with divaness, but it also makes her divaness inseparable from her Midwesternness; Hall is not just any diva, she is a Midwestern one specifically, and should one purchase and wear these pants, they too could become a Midwest diva.

² For example, Gdula writes, “After ‘Vogue’—and its obvious debt to the gay drag artists depicted in Jennie Livingston’s documentary, *Paris is Burning*—some critics would say [Madonna’s] sidling up to the gay community had always been in her best interest.” (2005)



Figure 19: Screenshot from Hall's website, where she sells "Midwest Diva Stretchy Pants."

The idea of glamor is a common thread in Hall's lyrics and descriptions of herself, and glamor has a longstanding relationship with the (especially male) queer community. Lloyd Whitesell (2006) uses Merriam-Webster to define glamour as "an exciting, often illusory or romantic attractiveness," and states that glamour is not only about appearance, but also an emotional attitude. As such, anything (e.g., a life of crime) can be glamorized through stagecraft and storytelling (Whitesell 2006: 264). Whitesell writes about the connection between queer culture and glamour in particular, stating that queer male labor was often responsible for the "sumptuous feminine garments" of Hollywood musical films and that such labor was represented in those films as well, positing gay men "as the custodians of the glamour of the theater" (Ibid: 263). Gay icons such as Marlene Dietrich and Judy Garland often starred in such films, deepening the connection between those icons and the gay community.

In addition to this connection between queer labor and the Hollywood musicals in which gay icons starred, Whitesell also asserts that "mainstream Hollywood images freely invite queer consumption" and allow for counter-ideological pleasure. He writes: "by

focusing on the gender ideal as a matter of aesthetics, mainstream musicals propound a view whereby femininity...is not an innate quality granted to all women but instead a special effect available to anyone with the proper skill and accessories” (Ibid: 273). He also states that the sheer excess of staged musical numbers permits an indulgence in fantasy that creates a space where glamour takes on a life of its own and can exist free from “real systems of gender attribution” (Ibid: 274). Here, again, we see the connection between glamour, excess, and queerness, which connects back to the previous chapter’s discussion of camp as the performance of excessively glamorous (or sometimes, excessively plain) femininities.

While Hall’s brand of glamour does not exactly fit into the traditional Hollywood glamour of the Ziegfeld movies or even the forced awkward glamour of Judy Garland, she certainly does utilize the staged musical number and the skill and accessories of glamour to create a space that indulges in fantasy. Instead of the fantasy of expensive and flashy Hollywood musicals, however, Hall employs a DIY glamour that connects to the queer DIY glamour of subcultural films such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), and John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974). Hall’s work references glamour in multiple ways, even from the beginning of her career when she titled her famed gem sweater gallery “Gallery of Glamore.” What is significant about Hall’s initial claim to fame is not only that it has “Glamore” in the title, but also the tension between calling the gallery glamorous and the type of “glamore” portrayed. That is, while a traditional fashion gallery would likely include expensive jewelry and clothing worn by a slender and conventionally attractive model, Hall’s gallery shows only one style of clothing—gold pants accompanied by gem sweaters—and that clothing was

neither expensive nor fashionable at the time of its debut in 2004 (or now, for that matter), and its model (Hall herself) is not a conventional one either. In addition, Hall's vacant facial expression creates a tension between both the cheap flashiness of her clothing, and the notion of glamour itself (Figure 20). Further, the misspelling of "glamour" in the gallery's title speaks to Hall's deliberate desire to portray imperfection, and some of the names Hall gives to the sweaters—such as "Cake Walk Chapion" and "Cresent Roll"—are deliberately misspelled as well.³ This spelling also speaks to Hall's penchant for the exaggerated; the spelling "glamore" not only has the word "more" in it and is therefore a play on words, but it also inspires a pronunciation that dramatizes the word further.

Hall positions herself as glamorous in several of her songs, just as she does in the Gallery of Glamore. For example, Hall's 2006 album *Door Man's Daughter* (as mentioned, a riff off Loretta Lynn's autobiographical song about her humble origins, and hardly a title that makes one think of glamour!) includes a song entitled "Shazam I'm Glamorous," and her 2008 album *ceWebrity* features the song "Real Gold and Glamorous." It may come as no surprise by this point that neither of these songs discusses conventional glamour. Instead, the former begins with a lyric about eating fried dough and shortly thereafter discusses her stretch marks, and the latter presents an unnamed crush getting to know Hall and what snacks she likes.

³ It is also worth noting that some of the gem sweater names, including those that are deliberately misspelled, are culturally appropriative or employ racist terminology (e.g., "Art River Sqwa" and "Navahoe branch.")



Figure 20: Screenshot from page 2 of Hall's "Gallery of Glamore" (Leslie Hall, n.d.).

Between the above lyrics about eating and stretchmarks and others such as “evacuate you heart/evacuate your trailer/cause without failure/all outfits, hand crafted by my mother’s touch/now, when I say Shazam, you tell me that I’m Glamorous,” it is clear that “Shazam I’m Glamorous” is not representative of the conventional thin-as-glamour aesthetic so common in Hollywood, nor is Hall portraying the upper-class type of glamour displayed by classic Hollywood songs about glamour such as “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” in the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Although these types of glamour are probably the most common association with the word “glamour” for many, Whitesell writes that glamour is not exclusively available to the upper-class: “Socioeconomic factors determine the resources one can count on its pursuit, but class does not automatically confer or withhold glamour” (265). Here, Whitesell asserts that, while glamour is often associated with the upper-class due to the financial accessibility of glamour therein, glamour does not belong exclusively to the upper-class. In the case of the aforementioned

queer DIY films, glamour is very much present, but more effort and resourcefulness were required to create glamour as it was not so easily bought.

Hall acknowledges the class distinction and difference in resources between her and the mainstream stars to whom she compares herself, describing her stage performances as “Vegas-style production at Midwest prices” (*Weirdest Band in the World*: 2014), which speaks to the resourcefulness valued in queer DIY glamour; the Vegas flash is still present, but it requires the dressing up of cheaper Midwest materials. Further, that Hall aspires to Vegas and not Hollywood carries additional meaning: it is not the glamour of high budget films but of casinos that she posits as the top, which means that her lofty basis for glamour falls short from the start. In addition to linking her glamour to lower-class resources, here Hall also links her glamour to her Midwesternness. She further solidifies this connection with the lyrics of “Shazam” and “Real Gold,” as in the former she refers to herself as a “Midwest lady cyclone” and in the latter, she says “we’re coming Midwest strong for your children.” These lyrical connections between glamour and the Midwest, along with the connection between Hall’s Midwesternness and her divaness discussed earlier, tie together lower-class glamour, the Midwest, and gay diva worship, indicating that Hall’s iconicity is different from and disruptive to upper-class mainstream Hollywood iconicity.

Cher of the Internet Age

In addition to aesthetics and self-proclamations, one very obvious indication that Hall serves as a gay icon is her large queer following. Several interviewers and journalists comment on this, including Andy Birkey’s 2014 article from the nonprofit LGBT media organization *The Column*, in which he writes, “She’s become such an icon for gay and lesbian fans that she’s started marrying them” (Birkey 2014). In a 2011 interview with *The*

Huffington Post, the interviewer comments on the seemingly disparate groups that comprise Hall's fan base (i.e., children and queers): "It's an interesting crossover appeal you've carved out — screaming toddlers and intoxicated gay bar enthusiasts" (Erbentraut 2011). It is clear from these interviews that Hall's queer following has been well recognized.

Further, an article in *The Advocate* directly connects Hall to other gay icons when the interviewer asks her: "I noticed you have a sizeable gay and lesbian following. Are you poised to become the Cher or Madonna of the Internet Age?" to which Hall responds:

Oh, yes. That is truly my destiny. I've been reading their biographies, trying to duplicate the same career paths. Trust me, my dreams are to fulfill your desires in the form of fame and glory. Let the beat take, take you; let my vision hold you and my quivering body tease you. (Advocate 2007)

This response indicates not only that Hall has a gay following, but also that she has sought from the start to be a gay icon. This intention is echoed in a 2009 "2 Dykes and a Mic" podcast interview, in which she responds to the question about why gays love her by commenting on the good taste of gay men and stating, "I'm just gonna keep doing what they like, and if they don't like, I'm gonna switch it." While it is unclear why Hall sought out a queer fan base, I speculate that it has something to do with her own (presumably queer) sexuality. In addition, because Hall has clearly studied celebrity in general, gay iconicity gave her somewhat of a concrete and notorious script to follow. Other reasons for Hall's desire to have a queer fan base could be that, as outliers, queers are an easy audience for difference, and Hall's fat body indicates difference (as I will discuss further in the following chapter).

Hall's gay iconicity is codified not only through her gay fan base and her intention to be a gay icon, but through many of the performance spaces in which she plays as well. Hall

has performed at many gay bars, including Seattle's Wildrose, Chicago's Berlin Nightclub, and Columbus' Axis Nightclub. She has also played at gay events such as pride festivals (Des Moines, Seattle, Ames) and stand-alone events such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival⁴ and Portland, Oregon's monthly queer dance party, Blowpony. In addition, many of Hall's performances are advertised in local gay publications such as *Seattle Gay Scene* and *Gay San Francisco*, demonstrating queer community support of and interest in Hall's live performances.

As discussed earlier, impersonation of gay icons by drag queens reinforce the iconicity of those stars, and this is true for Hall as well. Although more performances have likely occurred than those recorded and posted online, YouTube alone culls at least six videos of drag reenactments of Leslie Hall's music, five of which are videos of live performances. The videos of these performances span from 2011 to 2017, indicating that Hall's role as a gay icon continues to the present, even though she describes herself as "kinda retired" and has not toured since 2014. What is also of note about these drag performances is that they occurred in geographical locations of varying sizes; the 2011 performance of "Tight Pants/Body Rolls" took place at "Valentine's is Such a Drag," a yearly drag night at the University of Lethbridge's Pride Centre; the 2014 performance of "Power Cuddle" by the IC Kings took place in Iowa City; Nina West's 2015 performance of "Tight Pants/Body Rolls" took place at Axis Nightclub in Columbus, OH (where Hall herself has performed); Raven's 2015 performance of "Glamorous" took place at Micky's in West

⁴ It is important to note that the admission policies for the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (a.k.a. "Michfest") had a legacy of transmisogyny that forced its eventual ending in 2015, and does not represent the political views of many members of the queer community, including the author of this dissertation. For more on Michfest, see Eileen Hayes' *Songs in Black and Lavender* (2010).

Hollywood; and Betty Bennett's 2016 performance of "Ring A Ding-Ding" took place at Burkhart's in Atlanta. What this geographical span demonstrates is that while Hall portrays herself specifically as a Midwestern diva/gay icon and gives voice to a non-urban queer experience, her appeal stretches from the non-urban to the very urban, and across the U.S. border to Canada.

Junior Gems & Little Monsters

Much like we saw with the "are you a friend of Dorothy" marker of group identity of previous generations, contemporary gay icon fandoms also have names, even if those names do not serve as the "secret handshake" that Harris (1997) describes. For example, Lady Gaga refers to herself as "Mother Monster" and her fans as "little monsters" (Click et. al 2013), and as mentioned in the previous chapter, Leslie Hall refers to herself as "Mother Gem" and her fans as "junior gems." These names indicate not only group belonging but also a maternal relationship between artist and fan group. However, although Lady Gaga has many looks, conventionally matronly is not one of them. By contrast, Leslie Hall, in all her small-town glamor, portrays the Midwestern mom or housewife (as discussed in the previous chapter) as a diva to be worshipped in place of the typical Hollywood glamor of early iconic film stars or the trendiness of pop icons. The "Two Dykes and a Mic" podcast quoted earlier also commented on this Midwestern housewife glamor when the hosts said, "You come across as an Ames, Iowa housewife with the sweaters on," to which Leslie replied "and mama can dance," demonstrating again that she is both a mama and an iconic DIY popstar (Two Dykes and a Mic 2009).

It is not that Leslie does not know any better—she is in on the joke. She does not perceive or portray herself as glamorous in the mainstream sense of many conventionally

famous icons. In contrast to the Hollywood star system or the mainstream music industry, Hall was not discovered by a big talent agent—her fame began with her and a laptop with a free mixing program on it. She feverishly marketed herself because nobody else would do it, again exemplifying the narrative discussed in the first chapter that YouTube can deliver a person from ordinariness to stardom. Hall further points to the DIY and quotidian qualities of her work when she satirically connects herself to popstars such as Beyoncé or Britney Spears as she does in the “How We Go Out” (2008) video discussed below and as she does with Jennifer Lopez in “Midwest Diva” (2008). In so doing, Hall exploits the discrepancies between those stars and her own stardom. Hall’s exploitation of these discrepancies connects to Whitesell’s aforementioned discussion of the tension between the ordinary and the glamorous; she deliberately misaligns an over-the-top portrayal of ordinary Midwestern experience with equally exaggerated glamour, pointing out that those qualities are not typically aligned. This tension is exemplified in Figure 21 below, where Hall and the LYs stand coolly in a cornfield in their standard flashy garb.



Figure 21: Hall and the LYs strike a pose in a cornfield, their flashy outfits contrasting with the rurality of the corn. Photo courtesy of Pinterest user LeAnn O'Neill.

In addition to representing the quotidian through her self-made fame, Hall also makes a key intervention into gay iconicity in that she provides portrayals of the Midwest and by extension, non-urban spaces more generally. This flies in the face of the mainstream media as well as academic queer studies, both of which have codified an association between queerness and large, coastal urban centers such as San Francisco and New York. William Spurlin critiques this association, stating that the mainstream media, queer studies, and advertisements for queer cultural and political events make it seem as if the only locations in which queers can “truly self-identify” are New York and San Francisco (Spurlin 1996: xi). Spurlin goes on to show that this perceived connection between coastal urbanness and queer identity is not because of some quality inherent to urbanness (xv),

but instead arose out of particular historical contexts. Specifically, following World War II, the military discharged many lesbian and gay personnel, loading them onto “queer ships” and sending them to the nearest port city (e.g., New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco). Many of these military personnel were too embarrassed to go home due to having been undesirably discharged and therefore remained wherever they disembarked, which instigated the creation of these large-scale queer urban hubs (xvi).

Queer geography scholars such as Gavin Brown (2008), K. Browne (2008), and Tiffany Muller Myrdahl (2013) have also worked to disrupt the notions of queerness as inherently urban and urbanness as inherently queer. They argue that centering the narratives of urban queers (and urbanness more generally) in queer scholarship has created a hierarchy between urban and non-urban spaces and between the experiences of urban and non-urban queers (Brown 2008), and that the urban/non-urban binary is a false one (Browne 2009). This hierarchy and false binary between the urban and non-urban queer experience also lends itself to a non-urban to urban teleology; a queer person may be born in a small town, but the narrative has it that they will eventually move to an urban center and find happiness and political support. This teleology is false and erases non-urban queer experiences. Myrdahl discusses this erasure: “[Positing] that small cities...serve the sole function of being ‘the city from which one escapes’ obfuscates the queer lives that are being forged there” (Myrdahl 2013: 295). This small town/city to urban center teleology provides an interesting parallel to the ordinary to glamorous trajectory of iconic characters such as Maria von Trapp of *Sound of Music* (1965) and Dorothy of *Wizard of Oz*. Hall clearly challenges these trajectories by staying put in the

small town of Ames, Iowa and developing her DIY fame there instead of escaping to a coastal urban center to try and “make it” in a conventional sense.

Hot Pocket People & Marching Bands

Not only does Hall’s continued residence in Iowa challenge the rural to urban teleology, but her music videos do as well, as they commonly depict non-urban spaces typically left out of the mainstream media, queer studies texts, and notions of stardom in general. One example of Hall’s representation of the non-urban queer is the 2008 music video for “How We Go Out,” which discusses a night out dancing. “How We Go Out” is shot entirely through a fisheye lens, giving it a feeling that a home videographer experimented with new technology but took it a little too far. The video was filmed in Ames, a town in which there is no designated gay bar. The video juxtaposes a thrift store, video store, and small nightclub, changing backgrounds so quickly that the video feels like a seamless one-shot performance in the same location. The frequency with which the video jumps to each establishment causes all venues to seem both equally quotidian and equally nightclubby. A stark contrast from the extravagance of most mainstream music videos shot in nightclubs, Hall’s nightclub looks like a small town gay bar that is as unglamorous as a thrift store, and the thrift store suddenly feels as glamorous as a nightclub. Further, because of the ordinariness of the stores and bar as well as the very plain clothing of the other bar patrons, Leslie Hall’s own extravagant and absurd glamor is able to come to the fore. She positions herself as the leader of the pack—the person with the insight into the after party, who wears the brightest and tightest outfit and dances in the center of every group at the club.

In addition to the quotidian setting of “How We Go Out,” the lyrics also deliberately include nods to Middle America. For example, the lyrics for the opening verse are “on the way to the clubs we pass a Dairy Queen/You stop ‘cause you know how much it means to me/We take the backseats out of your minivan/Now we roll like a Hummer or full-sized sedan.” The mention of Dairy Queen and a minivan don’t exactly call up images of cosmopolitan glamour but instead focus on eating (again, and at a chain establishment specifically) and driving the type of vehicle associated with soccer moms. Further, the chorus includes the line “wave to the Hot Pocket peoples with the smiles on their face,” again a mention of convenience food that seems to deliberately represent Middle America’s associated industrialism, love of convenience, and poor taste. Further, Hall mentions “scrapbooking everything we do” multiple times in “How We Go Out,” which connects to the relationship between Midwesternness and crafting discussed in the previous chapter. This mention of scrapbooking also provides a stark contrast to the feverish paparazzi photography experienced by mainstream celebrities;⁵ here, nobody is taking Hall’s photograph, rather she is the one photographing and cataloguing her experiences.

Another video in which Hall juxtaposes queer glamor and non-urbanness is “Your Not Taken,” which again seems to indicate that Hall deliberately falls short of conventional success in that she deliberately misspells “you’re.” The music video for “Your Not Taken” was recorded and distributed by Love Drunk, “a live, mobile audio/recording studio from Omaha,” that puts “together live, one-take music videos of artists performing in cool locations” (YouTube: n.d.). Love Drunk does a significant amount of recording in Nebraska,

⁵ It is interesting to note that there is a Lady Gaga song entitled “Paparazzi” (2008), in which Lady Gaga sings from the position of the paparazzi.

but also travels to locations throughout the Midwest. Their videos date back to 2010, and Hall's video was released in 2012 as Love Drunk's 75th video. It is worth noting that, at fifty-six thousand views, "Your Not Taken" is the second most viewed of all the Love Drunk videos (second only to the video of Ann Arbor band Frontier Ruckus, who performs a medley of songs from the video game *Zelda*).

"Your Not Taken" was filmed in a rural part of Ames, a college town that also has a downtown area. The backdrop to Hall's video is made up of grass, rock, fences, and abandoned truck trailers. Instead of just featuring Leslie and the Lys, the video brings in more people to form a very small marching band. Not all the instruments in the band are standard marching band instruments; while there is a snare drummer, a cymbal player (Mona, who is one of the Lys), and a person that switches between flute, clarinet, and trumpet, there is also a bass guitarist, a person who marches with a small radio around her neck, and another that holds an electric keyboard. None of the instrumentalists appear to actually be playing their instruments, with the exception of the drummer and cymbal player, who do not always play beats that connect with the audio.

Hall does not hold any instrument, but instead dances bizarrely. She is wearing a variation of her standard gold jumpsuit, which has neon ropes draped from the external shoulder pads. The "band" members are all wearing black calf-height boots and brightly colored bodysuits with similar neon ropes draped from the top. They are all also wearing sunglasses, while Hall is not. The video was filmed at dusk, which indicates that the sunglasses serve a purpose other than to protect the band members from the sun—likely to look ridiculous and potentially mock conventional divas, and also to cover the faces of the band members so that only Hall's over-the-top facial expressions can come to the fore.

Throughout the video, the band members (and to a lesser degree, Leslie) move from one spot to another to create different formations, just as a marching band does.

The lyrics of “Your Not Taken” are written from Hall’s perspective and directed toward an unknown crush or potential lover. The lyrics ask why the crush is not already in a relationship (“Somebody tell me why your not taken”) and suggest quotidian activities they could do together as a couple, such as having “lunch or fruit punch” or cooking a stew and having “lazy days.” The lyrics of the song never indicate the gender of Leslie’s crush. The line “just access the part of your brain that says maybe/today’s the day I might meet a nice lady” positions Leslie as the “nice lady” and does not specify the gender of the crush. However, if one simply hears “Today’s the day I might meet a nice lady” and not the previous line that says “your brain,” the line easily sounds like Hall hopes today is the day she meets a nice lady, leaving room for a queer reading of the text. Further, not identifying the gender of the crush leaves room for people of all genders to identify with the crush, which could also leave room for an implied queer relationship.

In addition to the vagueness of the gender of Hall’s crush, “Your Not Taken” reads as queer because of the stark contrast between the brightly colored outfits and the rural landscape. It looks like Hall and her queer party friends got all dressed up for 80’s night at a nightclub but ended up in an abandoned yard next to the highway instead. Not only do the outfits provide aesthetic contrast from the landscape, but the lyrics seem to loosely describe an experience at a nightclub as well. For example, the line “‘cause I love what you’re moving and I love how you’re shakin/you just ease into that hip snap/as you glide into a quick clap” could easily be found in a pop song at a bar, but is instead being sung while standing outside on undeveloped land. The rhythm that accompanies the line, which

features longer notes than the previous lines, gives the line a slowing effect, providing further contrast to the lyrics of the line. In addition to the visual and musical contrasts found in the video, Hall also places romance into a backdrop with which it is not commonly associated—a contrast that parallels the notion of a rural queer.

Married by a Midwest Diva

Another demonstration of Hall giving a nod to non-urban queers is through her wedding business, which hosts queer weddings in her hometown of Ames, Iowa. The packages include items associated with non-urbanness, such as chickens, illegal fireworks, and a discount motel. By including such items in the packages, she positions them as desirable, in turn rendering the Midwest desirable. In so doing, Hall creates space for queer experiences in the rural Midwest, a region typically thought of as heteronormative and anti-queer.

The 2013 documentary, “Married in Spandex” follows a lesbian couple from Philadelphia to Ames and through their wedding, officiated by Leslie Hall. What the documentary shows is that not only does the wedding take place in a small town and include things like chickens, but the space in which the wedding took place—a small warehouse with white walls and exposed pipes—was mundane and non-glamorous as well. The family of the brides is in “complete and utter shock” at the facility itself, which the father of one of the brides describes as “a storage compartment,” stating that it is not a space in which a wedding should take place.

In addition to the location itself, the family is also appalled at its condition because it is not clean, set up, or decorated when they arrive. After the brides and family pitch in, along with Hall and her crew, the space is transformed into a somewhat more appropriate

place for a wedding. The walls are decorated with gem sweaters, including the “world’s largest gem sweater,” which we saw in the music video “Craft Talk” in chapter two. That the family and Hall’s crew all have to pitch in to make the wedding possible further reinforces that the nature of Hall’s work is very DIY--she is not only DIY herself, but she requires her clients to be as well.

When the time comes for the wedding, the LYs wheel Leslie, who is dressed in her standard gold garb (this time including a cape), down the aisle on a small dolly. Hall greets the family—who are all wearing at least one small strip of gold lamé—as she moves down the aisle. Hall holds in her hands a book with queer of color celebrity Queen Latifah on the cover, which she uses in place of a more official wedding officiant text (such as the Bible or other religious text). Queen Latifah’s image on Hall’s book is the only thing resembling conventional celebrity in the entirety of the documentary. While it is unclear why Hall uses a book with Queen Latifah’s face on it specifically, I speculate that it is both because of Queen Latifah’s queerness as well as the fact that her name is Queen. The word “queen” has queer cultural value because of drag queens, and it is also not so far from “diva” --both words refer to powerful, glamorous, iconic women.

Following Leslie’s entrance, the brides walk in a stylized fashion down the aisle to meet each other. Leslie begins the wedding in as goofy a manner as one who is familiar with her work would expect, although the family members of the brides appear to be very off put by the joking manner of the entire ceremony. In fact, in a voiceover of the wedding footage, the father of one of the brides says, “the sincerity of the whole was starting to concern me.” Leslie begins the wedding by saying,

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of family and friends to join Rachel and Amanda in marriage. I am especially honored to join these two

extraordinary women in matrimony, not only because they have good taste in lady jams, but also because getting married in spandex, of course, I needed to be here for this magical, magical creation.”

This introduction again shows Hall commenting on the “good taste” of the queer community (which is interesting, as previously she mentioned the “good taste” of gay men specifically, not lesbians), and also posits her as inspirational to the couple, as they decided to be married in spandex just like Hall wears in her performances. Leslie then instructs the brides to say their vows, and the brides affirm the lack of sincerity Rachel’s parents criticize when they casually declare that they forgot the rings.

Following the ceremony, Hall gives a brief performance comprised of “Blame the Booty” and “Midwest Diva” (and potentially other songs that were cut from the documentary). Following Hall’s performance, the documentary shows parts of the reception, while a voiceover from Rachel’s mother states, “I didn’t want my mother or people that might not be exposed to the gay community to think that was like a normal gay wedding because it wasn’t. It was their wedding and they did it the way they wanted to do it.” This quote is particularly ironic because of the association of the Midwest and normativity mentioned in the previous chapter; the wedding that Leslie Hall provides is actually quite outside the ordinary, despite its placement within and deliberate focus on “ordinary,” small town life.

“Married in Spandex” further demonstrates the stark contrast between Hall’s iconicity and that of mainstream icons when compared with the mass Grammy wedding of 2014. Macklemore—another mainstream musical artist who is vocal on the topic of gay marriage—performed his gay marriage anthem “Same Love” as the introduction to the wedding. The wedding consisted of thirty-three couples and was officiated by, of all people,

Queen Latifah, who graced the cover of Leslie Hall's aforementioned wedding officiation book. As these couples of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations displayed their affection on live television, Queen Latifah spoke proudly about the diversity on display. Following Queen Latifah's brief words, Madonna entered the stage wearing an all-white pantsuit and a white cowboy hat. She then sang the chorus of her 1986 hit "Open Your Heart to Me," which led back into the "she keeps me warm" loop of Macklemore's "Same Love."

The entire instance of the Grammy performance/wedding seemed to create an amalgam of all things associated with the mainstream gay present—several gay icons, a gay marriage anthem, and multiple gay marriages themselves are put together on one large, glamorous stage. By contrast, Hall's side business of officiating queer weddings is significantly smaller in scale, as her most expensive wedding package is \$2999. Further, as we saw in the *Married in Spandex* documentary, Hall's weddings are largely DIY. The Grammy stage at the Staples Center in Los Angeles had a fancy cathedral-esque door that was likely constructed solely for the purpose of that mass wedding. By contrast, the weddings Hall officiates are held in a "storage compartment" that the bridal party had to clean and decorate themselves, Hall is rolled in by her friends on top of a dolly, and the walls are decorated with gem sweaters from thrift stores or that Hall received by donation.

Mainstream Commercialism vs the Queer DIY

As we have seen, mainstream artists that serve as gay icons have provided respite and cultural markers for queer people in various ways throughout the concept's existence. However, in considering the roles of gay icons, one also needs to think critically about temporal context. For example, at present we live in a moment wherein gay and lesbian

rights take up a large part of the political climate of the United States and the neoliberal marketplace. In this context, predominantly white gays and lesbians have become targeted as exceptional consumers, resulting in a multitude of market niches such as tourism, fashion, and adoption. As such, I must consider the implications of continuing to view mainstream artists as icons in a political climate in which support of queer people (or at least gays and lesbians) is to some degree trendy and commercialized. While I do not doubt that many still see tremendous amounts of value in icons such as Lady Gaga (Click et. al 2013), in part because mainstream representation still matters to many in psychological and material ways, I am also left to wonder what degree of radicalism a mainstream artist can achieve and also which queers they are able to represent and still maintain mainstream appeal.

Further, because the central hubs for mainstream artists (i.e., New York and Los Angeles) are the very coastal urban centers associated with queer identities--the association this chapter critiques--gay icons are unable to do much in the way of representing non-urban queer identities, and in rare instances in which they might try, it is often appropriative. For example, Lady Gaga, a native of New York City, recently released a country album, *Joanne*, most likely a riff off Dolly Parton's "Jolene" (1974). As evidenced by Gaga's history of dance pop music, country is not the genre in which she is most at home, and her upbringing in New York was very disconnected from the poor white rural communities often associated with country and in which Dolly Parton grew up. Hence, Lady Gaga's trip down the country lane felt forced and largely unsuccessful.

At the crossroads of the mainstream music industry and liberal politics, contemporary mainstream gay icons are strongly intertwined with queer neoliberalism—

the idea that queers are being targeted as exceptional white consumers. As such, DIY media is an available avenue for new gay icons to arise. It has the potential to allow for more variety and nuance within gay iconicity, as well as the opportunity to push against the notion that queers are a market niche. Leslie Hall is a great example of this, as the internet (and YouTube more specifically) allowed her to attain a queer fan base and maintain representation of non-urban queerness. Further, her representation of white blue-collar femininity diversifies gay iconicity, as mainstream gay icons are obviously conventionally famous and therefore incredibly wealthy. By contrast, Hall attained fame but remained blue-collar, as her YouTube fame did not result in her becoming conventionally successful in a financial sense. Hence, Hall's work represents not only a blue-collar status in its "Las Vegas production at Midwest prices," but in its portrayal of non-urban queerness. Such iconicity flies in the face of traditional gay iconicity, which has largely portrayed urbanity, wealth, and high-class glamour.

At the same time, Hall's gay marriage business leaves us with a bit of a paradox, as many critique gay marriage for being neoliberal and normative (Muñoz 2009, Eng 2010, Spade 2015). That is, gay marriage rights are framed as the "final frontier" of civil rights, which have allegedly "already been bestowed on racial minorities" (Puar 2007: 118). These gay civil rights are also falsely viewed as the all-encompassing political achievement that would end queer oppression, despite only benefitting privileged members of the community that desire and can afford marriage. The paradox of Hall is that her gay marriage business does not undermine the normativity of the institution itself, nor challenge the notion that marriage should be the goal for the queer community, yet to some degree, the Leslie Hall wedding experience does make a mockery of marriage and cannot

hold a candle to the extreme commercialism of the Grammy wedding. Instead, it requires those that wish to have their wedding officiated by Hall to travel to Iowa, sleep in a budget motel, and clean the “storage compartment” in which they will be wed. As such, the intervention of Hall’s marriage business lies in, to some degree, making a joke of the institution, and making uncomfortable the normative heterosexual family members of those getting married.

Conclusion in the Key of Gold

This chapter has demonstrated the differences and similarities between Hall and mainstream gay icons past and present. As evidenced by Hall’s deliberate pursuit of a gay fan base, her gay marriage business, and her self-identification as a glamorous diva, her work connects to the longstanding lineage of gay icons--a connection reinforced by drag impersonations of Hall. At the same time, while these common threads exist between Hall and more mainstream gay icons, her work also differs significantly from those gay icons, as it portrays a low budget Midwestern style of glamour and clearly positions her work in the non-urban Midwest, exploiting a perceived tension between the ordinary and the glamorous. Her DIY work disrupts the commercialism of mainstream gay iconicity and gives voice to oft-ignored Midwestern queerness. As the next chapter will explore, Hall further transgresses the Hollywood glamour of mainstream gay icons and stereotypes of the Midwest by deliberately portraying herself as monstrous and celebrating her fat body.

“There’s plenty of star power even if you are freakishly ghoulish and unlovable.”-Leslie Hall, “How to Make a Gem Sweater”

*“When the zombie outbreak first hit, the first to go, for obvious reasons... were the fatties.”- Columbus, *Zombieland**

Chapter Four. The Fat Monster On Main Street

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, by juxtaposing the ordinary and the glamorous and camping Midwestern femininities, Hall’s queer DIY work disrupts stereotypes of the Midwest and gives voice to non-urban queerness. Continuing this exploration of how Hall’s work transforms Midwest tropes of normativity, this chapter analyzes how Hall employs aesthetics of monstrosity. Drawing from monstrosity studies texts such as Steven Asma’s *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (2009) and Alexa Wright’s *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (2013), I provide an overview of societal constructions of monstrosity and the role such constructions play in defining humanness. I discuss how these constructions of human and monster work to determine “acceptable” bodies and behaviors; the monster is that against which the human is measured.

Building upon this discussion of monstrosity and acceptable bodies, I utilize fat studies work such as Amy Farrell’s *Fat Shame* (2011), LeBesco and Braziel’s *Bodies Out of Bounds* (2001), and Hannele Harjunen’s *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body* (2016) to establish that fatness is seen as monstrous in U.S. culture. I explore the cultural mechanisms used to control and erase fat bodies and scrutinize the longstanding use of fat bodies as entertainment in American culture. In examining this history, I discuss the significance of agency on the part of fat entertainers, and in particular, Leslie Hall.

Analyzing the music videos and lyrics for Hall's songs "Blame the Booty" and "Tight Pants (Body Rolls)," I demonstrate the ways that Hall calls attention to her size, such as using extremely close camera angles, surrounding herself with significantly smaller people, and dancing in ways that focus our attention on her fat. Because of the mythical creatures such as trolls and Hall's grotesque facial expressions and behaviors in the "Tight Pants" video, that analysis serves as a pivot point to my examination of Hall's two very different music videos for her song "Zombie Killer." These analyses consider the ways that Hall toys with the consumptive connection between zombies and fatness and avoids positioning herself as fully "human" in the face of the zombies in her videos. I assert that, by portraying herself as monstrous vis-a-vis both the humans and monsters in her videos, Hall blurs the line between human and Other and rejects societal pressures to become smaller and more conventionally beautiful. Further, I contend that, in the wake of 9/11, refusing to become smaller and positioning herself as the heroine of the apocalypse also pushes back against national panic about the alleged vulnerability of obesity and the threat it posed to the safety of the United States.

Cultural Constructions of Human Monstrosity

The word "monster" is derived from the Latin word *monstrum*, the root of which is *monere*, meaning "to warn." In the words of Steven Asma, "To be a monster is to be an omen" (Asma 2009: 23), warning us of the limit of human identity. The monster serves as the "other" against which humans can define themselves. As Alexa Wright explains, "the main historical purpose of human monsters [is] to provide a tangible site for exploring the problem of what constitutes acceptable human identity" (Wright 2013: 1). Further, how humanness (and therefore also monstrosity) is constituted depends on cultural and

historical context (Ibid.: 3). Monstrosity has been attributed to non-human fantastical creatures (e.g., the Kraken), beings that border on human (e.g., vampires), humans of perceived moral failing (e.g., serial killers), and humans physically perceived as “Other” (e.g., disabled people). This chapter is predominantly interested in the last three categories, as I examine Hall’s depictions of beings that border on human and show the way that fatness uniquely connects alleged moral failing with those perceived as physically “Other.”

Two qualities often associated with monstrosity are liminality and hybridity. Historically, “the liminal” and “the hybrid” have long been considered monstrous or freakish. Asma writes that an anxiety about species that blur the line between human and non-human animal or between male and female is rooted in ancient history. For instance, many mythical monsters such as centaurs and the sphinx are hybrid beings--half human and half horse or lion, respectively. Further, the anxiety surrounding bodies that are liminal between male and female (i.e., intersex bodies) can be dated at least back to Roman law, in which intersexuality was punishable by drowning (Asma 2009: 42).

These fears about liminality laid the groundwork for multiple types of entertainment. For example, in Rony’s *The Third Eye* (1996), the author shows that ethnographic cinema began as anthropologists sought to capture the last remaining elements of “savage” cultures. Here, ethnographic subjects were seen as monstrous because of their perceived liminal position between primitivity and civilization that resulted from contact with modernity, and that liminality was commodified through ethnographic cinema.

Further, as Wright discusses, the popular freak shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries put liminal bodies on display for entertainment. For instance, the

author writes about a man with a condition that led to excessive body hair growth, causing him to be framed as blurring the line between human and animal. Exhibited as “JoJo, the Russian Dog-faced Boy” in the late 1800s, Fedor Adrianovich Jeftichew toured both the United States and Europe extensively, his “animal-like appearance...exaggerated during performances” (Wright 2013: 85). This legacy of displaying the “Other” that stems from ethnographic cinema and freak shows continues to the present and is demonstrated, at the very least, by our cultural fascination with reality television that I discussed in the first chapter. While some reality television shows seek to display “ordinary people,” they often display ordinary “freaks” such as fat and little people (Backstrom 2012).

In addition to a cultural interest in monstrosity as entertainment, the nineteenth century also brought about a field of scientific thought dedicated to the classification of monsters: teratology. Rosemarie Garland Thomson traces the history of teratology, writing that it arose at a time when scientific explanation “eclipsed religious mystery” and became the dominant cultural narrative of modernity. This shift caused exceptional bodies to be increasingly represented clinically as pathologies, and “the monstrous body moved from the freak show stage into the medical theater” (Garland Thomson 1996: 2). Here, the author describes a change from amusement and religious mystery about monsters to a means of studying them, classifying them, and attempting to solve the mysteries of their pathologies.

Because of this new means of examining physically “monstrous” bodies, Western society also changed its framework for what constituted monstrosity. With the new trend in pathological considerations for physical otherness came a new emphasis on mental or behavioral characteristics instead of physical ones. Foucault traces this shift in *Abnormal*

(1999). He writes that, following this obsession with hybrid and liminal beings as bolstered by nineteenth century freak shows, cultural constructions of monstrosity switched from physical monstrosity to monstrosity of character. Foucault discusses how this shift from bodies perceived as accidents of nature to an obsession with deviant behavior significantly changed the source of blame. That is, with pathologies that created physical “Others,” the blame could be attributed to nature. However, in constituting monstrosity through perceived moral or behavioral failings, there is more room for the individual to be blamed for their difference; the person’s choices are what instigates their monstrosity (Foucault 1999: 73).

The Delight and Disgust of the Fat Monster

Despite the cultural shift from physical to moral abnormalities that Foucault describes, fatness is one form of physical monstrosity that persists in U.S. culture wherein the blame is not commonly attributed to nature. Indeed, fatness is considered a personal moral or behavioral failing that manifests physically. However, this has not always been the case. As Amy Farrell discusses in *Fat Shame* (2011), fatness was considered a marker of physical and evolutionary failing as early as the nineteenth century United States:

Fat became clearly identified as a physical trait that marked its bearers as people lower on the evolutionary and racial scale...Thin, in contrast, became identified as a physical trait marking those who were higher on the evolutionary and racial scale...Fatness, then, serves as yet another attribute demarcating the divide between civilization and primitive cultures, whiteness and blackness, good and bad. (Farrell: 64)

Here, the author shows how fatness has a longstanding history of being considered “less than,” and “Other,” or what we refer to as “marked” categories. While we no longer assume

fat bodies to be lower on the evolutionary scale, in creating a hierarchy between thinness and fatness, American society laid the groundwork for othering fat bodies.

In accordance with the association of fatness with primitivity, fat bodies became a source of entertainment for the masses when the previously mentioned nineteenth century freak shows employed fat performers along with others whose bodies were seen as physical or evolutionary anomalies. Among these performers, fat people, and particularly fat women, were typically the biggest crowd pleasers (Ostman 1996: 128). While freak shows proper have largely gone out of fashion, fat bodies are still objectified for entertainment purposes, such as on reality shows like *My 600-Pound Life* and *The Biggest Loser*, where audiences can simultaneously delight in and be repulsed by watching the fat body struggle, eat, and become more or less fat.

While fatness is a physical marker attributable to a variety of causes (genetics, medications, etc.), it has become so stigmatized that it is seen as a symbol of emotional, mental, and moral issues (Stulman Dennett 1996: 323). In *Bodies Out of Bonds*, the authors draw from Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993), in which she asserts that body size has "come to function as 'a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual...The firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct *attitude*, it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others'...Corpulent bodies have come to represent the opposite...a personal failure" (Brazier and LeBesco 2001: 49). Bordo tells us that body size is a signifier of attitude, state of being, and degree of care of the self, all of which place blame firmly in the body's beholder instead of outside factors.

The idea that size is chosen by the fat individual and is thus a sign of the person's moral failure has only proliferated over time. For example, Harjunen demonstrates how

neoliberalism brought about an intensified focus on the individual and individual choice. This upswing in individualism created a larger market for diet and “wellness” products, leading to what is now a multi-billion-dollar diet industry. The reach of that industry is so vast that it is impossible to untangle the influence of the market from the way fat bodies are viewed in the present-day dominant United States culture. Harjunen uses the term “fat panic,” and states that this panic has proven to be harmful, and further reinforced the stigma that the fat body is a moral failing because it is predominantly seen as a choice--a failure to control one’s body. In turn, this assumption regarding choice is used to “justify the discrimination and shaming of fat people” (Harjunen 2016: 5). This discourse has made the stigmatization of fatness more widespread, public, and socially acceptable.

The Obeastity Epidemic

Although anxiety around and hatred of fatness clearly has a long history, the discourse of the “obesity epidemic” to which Harjunen refers developed in the early 2000s. The attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 instigated an increase in fears of America’s vulnerability. Fatness was seen as contributing to that vulnerability, and weight loss therefore came to be seen as an act in support of the nation. As Charlotte Biltekoff recalls, just a few months following 9/11, then-Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson “urged all Americans to lose ten pounds ‘as a patriotic gesture’” (Biltekoff 2007: 36). This suggestion set the scene for the proliferation of the obesity epidemic as a concept, despite “significant controversy about the biomedical premise” of the epidemic (Ibid.: 30). That is, while the obesity epidemic claims an objective medical perspective and concern for health, it is also an anti-obesity moral panic predominantly rooted in controversial science and media rhetoric. Further, Biltekoff writes

that obesity “came to be defined as a disease through the concerted efforts of those with vested interests, such as the public health establishment, the government, and pharmaceutical and weight loss industries” (Ibid.). Indeed, the lack of widely accepted medical research and the connections to those profiting off its proliferation oversimplify the connection between body size and health, conflating health with physical appearance. As Biltekoff continues, “the anti-obesity campaign both posits and targets fatness as an irrefutable sign of illness while affirming and promoting thinness as an incontrovertible indicator of health” (Ibid.), meaning that the anti-obesity bombast attempts to convince us that one can assess the health of a body simply by how much space it takes up. This gross oversimplification glosses over other factors that constitute the health of a body (Ibid.), such as genetics, diet, stress levels, environment, and regularity of exercise.

As Biltekoff discusses, this watered down means of assessing the health of an individual also became a means of evaluating the health and vulnerability of the United States as a nation, as campaigns developed out of concern regarding the weight of members of the United States military, as well as the size of American bodies in general. These campaigns perpetuated the fear that the United States was even more vulnerable to terrorism because fat bodies are inherently seen as weak and unable to defend themselves. The “War on Terror” and the “War on Obesity” are thus integrally linked, born out of the same culture of fear. As Biltekoff writes:

Both wars contributed to a heightened sense of fear among Americans by promoting a perpetual sense of danger. At the same time that the federal government and the press were producing a pervasive sense that further terror attacks were imminent, they were relentlessly reminding their audiences of another deadly threat to the nation, obesity. (Biltekoff: 32)

This relationship between the obesity epidemic and the War on Terror connects deeply to monstrosity; since monstrosity is the “Other” against which humanness is defined, this relationship forces Americans to ask the question: how can we defeat monsters if we are ourselves monstrous? How can we organize well enough to defeat terrorism if we have individual issues with morality and self-governance on a mass scale (pun not intended)? These questions speak to a general cultural need to be seen as “human” and “normal” in the face of those we see as “Other.”

The Fat Zombie

As a genre that typically deals with cultural anxieties (Williams 2011: 2), the horror genre found itself uniquely equipped to deal with the culture of fear as well as critique some of the extreme conservative rhetoric that arose in response to 9/11 (Briefel and Miller 2011: 3). New subgenres such as “torture porn” came about, as did big-budget remakes of classic horror films (e.g., George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*), as well as a reinvigorated interest in traditional monsters such as vampires and zombies (Ibid.: 2). Of these, the figure of the zombie is particularly relevant--the zombie is a humanoid monster bent on turning all humans into zombies and thus signaling the demise of civilization. Further, the zombie is not an external threat like terrorism, but rather your neighbor or fellow shopper at the mall; fears regarding American vulnerability become quite clear in the zombie narrative, as zombies indicate a quotidian threat--one is vulnerable to a zombie attack in their own neighborhood. In addition, as a monster focused on consumption, the zombie is perhaps the closest analogy for fatness in the horror genre. The notion of a zombie apocalypse feels very close to the societal panic about obesity, as both render the U.S. population vulnerable in the face of terror of some kind, and in both cases, the root of

the problem is connected to eating. Because consumption is central to the zombie's essence, the figure has often been read as an allegory for late capitalist consumerist society.⁶ Lauro and Embry write to this end:

As a nonconscious, consuming machine, the cinematic zombie terrifies because it is a reflection of modern-day commercial society, propelled only by its need to perpetually consume...the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system. This ravenous somnambulist, blindly stumbling toward its next meal, is a machine that performs but two functions: it consumes, and it makes more consumers. (Lauro and Embry, 99)

Here, the authors articulate that the current zombie trope is as a monstrous eater, unable to control its impulses because it is no longer a human with will. This connects to the aforementioned notion that fatness is a choice and a moral failing, as fat bodies are seen as eaters so unconscious they are unable to control themselves.

In addition to the metaphoric connections between zombies and fatness, the fat body and the zombie are also linked in that they are monstrous in part because they are liminal. As previously mentioned, liminality has been a longstanding marker of monstrosity, and fatness is no exception. The fat body is a liminal one because it is viewed as a temporary condition—the “before” before the inevitable thin “after” (Harjunen 2016: 62). Further, because of the association of obesity with major, deadly health problems positions the fat body as always already marked for death, the fat body—like a zombie—is seen as being trapped between a living, “healthy” body and a dead one. I am not alone in making these connections between the way fat people and zombies are framed. Others

⁶ It is important to note that the zombie to which I am referring here is the consumptive figure that arose out of Romero's films and continues to present. The history of the zombie figure traces back to the Haitian slave rebellion, when the Haitian *zombi* was conceived of as the dead reawakened to labor—an enslavement of the supernatural. Then, the zombie's focus was on labor and not consumption. See Lauro and Embry (2008).

such as Jayne Raisborough (2011) and Deborah Morrison Thomson (2009) assert that fat bodies are seen as the “living dead” and a threat to civilization (Raisborough 2011: 108). Raisborough writes to this end: “There are many parallels...between the fat body and zombie -- an appetite unhinged from rationality and self-control, a self ‘taken-over’ so that no face or voice is needed and also a sense of monstrous threat that the zombie/the obese poses to civilization” (Ibid.: 109). Morrison Thomson remarks on how fat bodies are often represented in the media as headless; only the area between the neck and the knee are shown, allowing the fat of the stomach to fill the frame. Further, in this “spectacular decapitation” (Morrison Thomson 2009: 8), such representations symbolically remove the voice from the body (Raisborough: 109), thus also removing intellect and identity—any indication of humanness.

At the same time that zombies and fat bodies have the aforementioned similarities, zombie narratives in television and film are often unkind to fat bodies, positioning them as vulnerable in the face of the apocalypse, just as the obesity epidemic rhetoric positions fat bodies as vulnerable vis-a-vis alleged terrorists. Indeed, in films and television, fat people are often among the first to be eaten by the zombies. Exemplifying this point is the famous line from the movie *Zombieland* (2009): “The first rule of Zombieland: cardio. When the zombie outbreak hit, the first ones to go, for obvious reasons, were the fatties.” This line points to the assumption that fat bodies are unfit to withstand the zombie apocalypse, inherently vulnerable as they are unable to outrun a zombie.

The zombie canon aligns with the horror genre more generally, as fat bodies have often been objectified within it. The 2005 Australian movie “Feed,” for instance, depicts a male character that operates a pornography website featuring fat women who are being

held captive, force-fed, and raped. Visitors to the site can view the measurements of the women featured and place bets on which women will die first. *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) also comes to mind, as the serial killer Buffalo Bill, who is attempting to make a “woman suit” out of the flesh of his victims, specifically targets overweight women because they have the most skin.

A Case of Corn-fed, Unwed, Drop-Dead Girl

In contrast to the fatphobia of the horror genre and the United States in general, Leslie Hall creates work that centers her fat body instead of trying to minimize or objectify it. In celebrating her body (and eating for that matter), she transgresses the notion that fatness is a moral failing. Hall positions herself as a heroine of the apocalypse, pushing against the notion that fatness leaves one vulnerable to attack. Instead, she relishes the power and dominance of her fat body through songs and videos about her size, playing up her body’s perceived grotesqueness through tight clothing, deliberately monstrous facial expressions, close-up camera angles, and ghastly vocal timbres. Further, lyrics about eating as a fun and even romantic activity further demonstrate that Hall is uninterested in shyness or shame about food.

One such example of these strategies is “Blame the Booty LIVE,” a video of Hall’s performance on “Dr. Demento’s The Real UHF,” an internet show hosted by Dr. Demento, a musicologist and radio show host known most popularly as the person to bring Weird Al Yankovic to public attention. While a complete comparison between Yankovic and Hall is outside the scope of this project, this connection between the two of them is interesting, as several YouTube commenters have mentioned similarities in their work. In addition, Yankovic released a song called “I’m Fat” in 1988, which parodied Michael Jackson’s “I’m

Bad.” While the song is less celebratory about fatness than Hall’s (in part because Yankovic is not actually fat), this association with size and with Michael Jackson deepen this connection, as Hall also draws on Jackson’s work, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The “Blame the Booty” video was posted to YouTube in August of 2009 and, as the title suggests, is a song about Hall’s derriere, which the tactics of the video work to centralize as well. Despite being a live performance, “Blame” has qualities of a music video in that it switches back and forth between showing Leslie and the LY (there was only one LY in this performance) dancing on a stage—presumably before a live audience—and camera angles so close that the stage is able to be forgotten. In addition, Hall performs in front of a screen that repeatedly plays close-up clips of her flexing her butt cheeks to the beat, which only reinforces the centrality of Hall’s booty, as well as the music video feel of the recording.

Hall’s size is brought to light before she and the LY even begin their performance, as Dr. Demento announces their act by saying: “And now, performing live—LARGER THAN LIVE—in the Dr. Demento studios, showing her maaaaagic moves on the song ‘Blame the Booty,’ is Leslie and the Lys!” This sentence alone points to the connection between Hall’s fatness and the mythical or monstrous nature of her work, as Dr. Demento refers to Hall’s “moves” as magical, and makes a point of saying “larger than live,” which obviously points out Hall’s size. Following Dr. Demento’s introduction, we see Hall standing on stage in front of the aforementioned screen, which is framed by gold streamers. She is wearing a version of her standard tight gold outfit, this time with ruffles on the bottom and large bell sleeves, both of which are lined with purple fabric. Hall is sporting her typical bouffant and blue-eyeshadow look, and on her feet are the gold sequin shoes made famous by the “Tight Pants

/ Body Rolls” video, which I will analyze later in this chapter. Hall stares blankly outward, popping her hip in time with the music. Soon after, the LY appears next to her, facing the audience in a tight purple outfit and sunglasses, her hair in a voluminous ponytail. At the same moment, Hall is turned backward to the screen, flexing her butt cheeks to the beat while the LY bends her knees to the same. Next, they both face out and sway side-to-side for a few ticks, after which the camera zooms in to Hall, who motions dramatically upward as the video of her butt flexing cheeks begins to play in the background. Hall and the LY then dance in front of this background.

Hall begins to rap (or more likely, lip sync to the recording of the song) about someone having a crush on her, popping her hips in an upward motion to the beat of the music and eventually hip checking her LY to the side. It doesn’t take long for Hall to begin mentioning food, as she raps, “Hop on that moped we can go thirty miles an hour/After that hour buy me roses, candy, chips and flowers/I know you've got a crush but what can I do?/I prefer a little lovin' with my marinated tofu.” Hall mentioning food as a token of someone’s affection is telling of what’s to come—a description of her booty in connection with her love of eating. The chorus enters: “On my giant trampoline I go ‘bounce bounce’ you fall in love with every ounce ounce.” On the words “bounce bounce,” Hall flexes her hips and stomach upward to the beat, and on “ounce ounce,” she moves her hips in a circle—both moves clearly intended to call attention to her size and her stomach in particular.

The next part of the chorus is sung instead of rapped. Hall sings “Don’t, don’t blame me/Blame the booty/It’s such a cutie,” during which she dances in front of the screen, which is again showing the close-up of her flexing her butt, this time at a much closer

angle. Hall shimmies through the final part of the chorus, in which she raps: “A case of corn fed, unwed, drop dead girl/Just bootylicious booty breaking your heart,” a line that harkens back to the “corn and cold” description of Iowa I discussed in the second chapter. It also aligns the idea of a corn-fed Midwest girl with a reference to the ever popular Beyoncé, who eight years prior released the song “Bootylicious” with Destiny’s Child. Again, in comparing Beyoncé’s work to that of her own, and in particular the comparison between their bodies through the use of Beyoncé’s “bootylicious” terminology, Hall glamorizes her fat body even at the same time that she clearly falls short of Beyoncé’s conventional beauty. Following Hall’s alignment with Beyoncé, a musical interlude of heavy bass and drum beats enters, during which Hall and her LY roll their bodies up and down as the camera zooms in and out to the rhythm of the subwoofer.

Similar to Hall’s above lyric about her “bootylicious booty” being a heartbreaker, she goes on to rap about the dynamic between her and the person that has a crush on her—a dynamic in which she clearly has the upper hand:

Hold up, hold up/Please don't hate 'cos I play the game/And I tease them with bait
fo' sure/Me and you, on a blanket for two/You crack open a liter of Sahara Mist/You
speak of my beauty and how you're enchanted /You promise your love proposing
every wish & how you'll grant it/And every heartland honey just loves to
please/Those corn fed girls in the Wal-Mart jeans.

With these lyrics, Hall paints a picture of a suitor (and again, a genderless suitor, just as her crush in “Your Not Taken”) who is entranced with her beauty, positing Midwestern girls—depicted as lower class in her mention of “Wal-Mart jeans”—as dominant in relationships with “heartland honey[s].” These lyrics link back to my discussion in the second chapter about Hall’s representation of blue-collar Midwestern femininity, as she is clearly positioning blue-collar Midwestern women as not only lovable, but fantastically so.

When the chorus enters again, Hall repeats her previously described “bounce bounce” and “ounce ounce” dance moves, this time accompanied by a far more close-up angle from the camera. Next, Hall plays up her size in the most obvious way so far in the video. The chorus lyrics, which are sung rather than rapped, begin, “Don’t, don’t blame me/Blame the booty/It’s such a cutie,” as the camera zooms into Hall’s midsection, using a lens that distorts her body in the manner of a funhouse mirror (Figure 22), a subversive nod to the carnivals and freak shows described previously. Although funhouse mirrors will distort any part of your body placed in front of it, in this case, Hall chose to focus on her fat in order to make it appear larger than life. This distortion cuts Hall’s head and feet out of the shot, causing her body to appear much larger than it actually is, and reclaiming the “spectacular decapitation” of fat bodies discussed by Morrison Thomson (2009). She turns in a circle as if showing off her body, occasionally also twisting her hips in a circle. For the repeat of the same chorus lyrics, Hall turns in a circle again, her arm outstretched and with an even more extreme close-up of her bottom on the screen behind her. The LY is crouched down, admiring Hall’s rear as she turns. That this admiration comes from a female reinforces Hall’s place as a gay icon (as discussed in the previous chapter) --though the interaction is likely platonic, this moment has the appearance of a sexually oriented encounter, in turn causing this display to be not only fat and monstrous, but queer and monstrous as well. Further, Hall’s placement on a platform harkens back to the setup of freak shows, wherein monstrous bodies were put on display, but Hall takes this objectification and turns it around such that she is in charge of the performance, agentially allowing the audience to objectify her; she is the center of both attention and affection.



Figure 22: Screenshot from Hall's "Blame the Booty" video, in which she uses a lens that distorts her body in the manner of a funhouse mirror, calling attention to her size.

Hall then raps again about the dynamic between her and her suitor: 'Cos if you're looking for a lady/One that you can call your baby/And if you're looking to spoil me, royally oily and constantly/I'm not playing hard to get, no. I'm just hard to get/My booty, guilty. A booty loveliness." Here, she refers to her booty as "guilty," blaming its loveliness as the reason for her being hard to get. Again, Hall positions herself as dominant in the relationship and deserving of royal treatment. At this point in the video, Hall is kneeling on the ground, thrusting her hips upward as she raps. Video footage of her and the LY from the same performance play on the screen in the background. She and the LY then sway to the side in opposite directions to create a crisscross effect as Hall makes exaggerated grotesque facial expressions. The chorus enters once more, with Hall again repeating the "bounce bounce" and "ounce ounce" dance moves, and turning in a circle to the sung part of the chorus as the LY admires Hall's bottom.

The outro begins, during which Hall makes grotesque faces and dances in seemingly random ways, the camera layering images of Hall on top of one another so that she takes up most of the space in the shot (Figure 23), a thread so common in her work that her fans incorporate it into their videos, as I discussed in the first chapter. The music comes to a close with Hall crossing her arms and leaning back, again making a grotesque facial expression. In the final shots, we hear no music, and we see Hall turned backward, facing the now empty screen, seemingly to show off her booty once more. The LY is facing forward, her head turned toward her. The video ends with Hall bending over, looking like she's wiping off her legs, and the video freezes on her in that position as credits scroll by in the background.



Figure 23: Screenshot from Hall's "Blame the Booty" video on YouTube, in which multiple layers of Hall are layered over one another, causing her to take up most of the space in the shot.

As we can see, Hall calls attention to her size in a multitude of ways in "Blame the Booty." She utilizes close camera angles and distortion effects that cause her to appear "larger than life" (a phrase Dr. Demento's introduction plays on) and chooses to dance in

ways that cause her body to bounce and jiggle instead of trying to keep her fat contained. That this video was made in the thick of the War(s) on Obesity/Terror makes it even more rebellious, as Hall describes her body in ways that portray it as powerful and not, as obesity epidemic rhetoric would have it, vulnerable to attack. Indeed, the blame that “Blame the Booty” puts on Hall’s body is not because of its weakness but because of its power. Attributing such power to a fat body not only flies in the face of the obesity epidemic notion that fatness is weakness, but also the longstanding notion that fat bodies are unattractive and undeserving of love or the pleasures of sex.

Green Screen Monstrous Queen

“Blame the Booty” is not the only one of Hall’s songs in which she discusses parts of her fat body. Her most popular video, “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” refers to several parts of her body. The body rolls the song title mentions—a clever double meaning-- refer to both the rolling motion of Hall’s body as well as her fat rolls. In addition to calling attention to Hall’s “monstrous” size, the “Tight Pants” video portrays her as monstrous in other ways: Hall is the largest being in the forest, and is surrounded by tiny trolls, their smallness a deliberate contrast to Hall’s largeness. Further, in Hall’s interactions with the mythical beings, she does not portray herself as fully human. Instead, she makes grotesque faces throughout the video, and scares the other beings away with her stature, dance moves, and body hair.

The “Tight Pants” video opens with a shot of Hall’s legs from the knee down, walking to the eighth note beat, followed by a close-up on her friendly grimacing expression as she rocks right and left. Hall then walks until she stumbles upon a group of dancing trolls, one of whom is wearing tight pants. The tight-pants-clad troll dances centrally in the

background, framed with Hall's face on either side of the forefront of the shot. Hall asks if the troll can even dance in such pants, to which he responds with a demonstration, shaking his lower body in such a way that almost resembles a rocket ship preparing to take off. Realizing the importance of owning tight pants, Hall sings "I need to get some/ Put my body in them/ Then I will rule the world!" On the final sentence of those lyrics, Hall's face is close up and centered in the frame, making a ghoulish or maniacal expression. On the word "world," she changes to a higher register and her timbre to a ghostly one that borders on the non-human.

Following this scene, Hall is pictured dancing in the center back of the shot, towering over the trolls and the Lys, who are dressed as white tigers wearing sunglasses. Here, Hall's kicks and arm movements resemble those of an aerobic exercise video, but in contrast to such videos, Hall's focus is on making her body jiggle instead of slimming it down. On the first line of the chorus, "Watch out for my body rolls/ watch out for my body rolls," the LYs are on either side of the frame, and Hall's face rolls up and down in the background. This shot of her face is so large that the viewer is unable to see the entirety of her face at any one point. Here, again, she makes a somewhat strange expression, her light fuchsia lipstick and bright blue eyeshadow accenting the close up of her slightly crooked teeth and intensely vacant eyes.

Throughout the rest of "Tight Pants," Hall continues to be the dominant focus of every shot. The video rotates between closeups of her face and moments when she is towering over the other creatures in the forest. However, despite Hall's power, the mythical creatures do not give her exactly what she wants; Hall begs the troll to make her a pair of tight pants, and he initially agrees until he notices her anthropomorphized leg hair

quivering and screaming. Hall sings: “’Twas the last stitch on the final seam/He placed onto me, my leg hairs quivered and screamed/I know I needed them more than ever/But then he looked at my legs and said ‘NEVER!’” On the final line of that section, Hall’s voice uses a low register and robotic timbre that befits her rhythmic speech. This moment is of interest, as Hall is shown as monstrous not only because of her fat body, but because of her body hair as well. Her defiance of feminine beauty standards prevents her from obtaining tight pants, the mythical troll--himself a monster--in disgust of her anthropomorphized leg hairs. That Hall has leg hairs disgusts the troll because they defy the conventional expectation that feminine people have little to no body hair. Hall also defies this expectation in her music video “Hydrate Jirate [sic],” a full analysis for which is unfortunately outside the scope of this dissertation, but wherein Hall dances with a gaggle of feminine presenting people, all of whom have armpit hair, which is revealed by their matching tank tops.

Following the troll’s disgust, and not leaving a moment for disappointment, Hall suddenly realizes she was already wearing tight pants, but she “just did not activate them.” Here, the word “activate” is low and heavily accented, again in a seemingly robotic tone. Hall’s realization that she simply needs to “activate” her tight pants and her refusal of the troll’s gatekeeping of her femininity can easily be read as a metaphor. That is, while the mainstream clothing industry creates far fewer clothing choices for fat people and mainstream fashion attempts to dictate what fat people “should wear” (e.g., avoiding horizontal stripes or bare midriffs so as to best conceal fatness), in this video (and in real life), Hall realizes that she has what it takes to dress herself however she wants. In real life, she and her mother make tight clothing in Hall’s size, and in the video, Hall just needs to “activate” her tight pants, and therefore has no need for the troll and his disgust. As such,

Hall proceeds to “activate” her pants by rolling her body up and down to the repeating phrase “body roll, body roll, high kick, high kick,” spoken rhythmically in a whispered tone. Hall then faces her audience in the left side of the shot, which is just of her body from the neck down, seemingly to accent her midsection and call attention to her physical monstrosity. On the right side of the screen, Hall is turned to the side while she rolls her body up and down. Because of the obvious effects of a green screen, her body has a green, glowing outline, adding an alien quality to the already space-like aesthetic of her gold bodysuit (Figure 24). This alien quality reinforces the monstrosity of the video, as it positions Hall as not only a terrestrial monster, but an extraterrestrial one as well.



Figure 24: Hall rolls her body in two ways in “Tight Pants.” Because of the green screen, she has a neon green outline around her body, giving her appearance an alien quality. Screenshot from YouTube.

After this focus on Hall’s “body rolls,” we see the trolls running in fear and surprise. In the shot following, the trolls are dancing in a kickline in the front of the screen. Behind them are the Lys, who dance side to side in their white tiger costumes. In the back of the shot are Hall’s legs from the knee down, dancing and taking up the most space in the shot. On the second to last repeat of “watch out for my body rolls,” Hall dances in a scooting

motion, pushing the trolls out of the shot. After the final “this is how we do it,” the video comes to a close with Hall dance-scooting across the screen from right to left, a movement that at least two fan videos replicate, as I discussed in my first chapter. The shot is a close up of her face, which is again making somewhat of a deliberately ghoulish expression.

As we can see in the “Tight Pants” video, Hall intentionally takes up the majority of the visual space and positions herself as the most monstrous of all the mythical beings in the forest. She is consistently the largest being, with two of her appearing in the same shot at multiple points in the video, a similar technique to the layering of Hall’s image in the “Blame the Booty” recording. Further, “Tight Pants” alternates between Hall’s interactions with the other, smaller beings and extreme close ups of her face, seemingly to stress that she takes up lots of space in every context. In addition to this visual centralization of Hall’s body, the lyrics to the song also focus on the power of her body and her dance moves. For example, Hall sings: “When I place my legs in a cage of spandex/I dance like hell to release the madness/Watch my feet pound holes in plywood/Watch my hips crush plates of baked goods,” which not only mentions the strength of her body, but also brings up the topic of food (again), showing that despite her size, Hall is not attempting to rid her life of baked goods as the obesity epidemic might suggest she should. Additionally, Hall describes herself as blurring the line between human and animal when she sings: “I’m a dance floor tiger lady pumping everything she has/Touching every single lad/Rubbing every lady gland/Work that dance floor they may vote you mayor jazz/One day have a plaque that says ‘She wore the tightest of pants.’” Here, Hall once more shows that her power and her monstrosity are not mutually exclusive but instead, wrapped up in each other. She again asserts her sexuality, reminding us that the fat body can be a sexual body, too.

Hungry for Brains, They Seek Some Satisfaction

Surrounding herself with other monsters as she does in “Tight Pants” is a tactic Hall repeats in other videos. A very obvious example is in her two music videos for “Zombie Killer,” a song off of *Doorman’s Daughter* (2006). The first of the two videos was filmed in 2005 and posted to YouTube in 2007, and the second was posted in 2008 with no information as to when it was filmed. Both videos pay homage to the horror genre in various ways and the music is mostly the same between the two videos with the exception of one omitted lyric, which I’ll discuss later. However, the aesthetics of each of the videos are quite different and, more significantly, so are their narrative outcomes.

The entirety of the first “Zombie Killer” video features scenes from George Romero’s iconic zombie horror film “Night of the Living Dead” (1968), which is widely regarded as the root of the contemporary American zombie genre. Like “Night of the Living Dead,” “Zombie” is shot entirely in black and white. The video opens with a scene from “Night,” wherein a television set with a news reporter appears on screen. The reporter says, “this is the latest disclosure in a report from National Civil Defense Headquarters in Washington...it has been established that persons who have recently died have been returning to life and committing acts of murder.” “Zombie” then cuts to an open field with zombies staggering and crawling through it, devouring flesh. Following that, we see Hall standing in the corner of a room, wearing an earlier iteration of her standard bouffant hairstyle, gold lamé outfit--this one a looser fitting (presumably) gold sequin t-shirt with looser gold pants, and accompanied by a belt with a large decorative buckle--and coke bottle glasses. She looks directly into the camera and gesticulates dramatically while singing the opening line: “I’m surprised to find the dead are walking around/Hell is full, they’re back in action/Hungry

for brains they seek some satisfaction/ We must not fear what we do not get--acid rain or laser jets/But good advice: seek guns and/or hammers, lots of wood and silky pajamas.”

The upbeat piano chords that accompany the song’s chorus enter, and the video cuts to Hall standing on the balcony of the house with the Lys. The three of them dance to the chorus: “Shoot them in the brains/If you want to live/Shoot them in the brains/Even the little kids” while the LYs hold fake wood guns that they casually point at the zombies attempting to crawl up the balcony from lower parts of the house. When we hear the words “even the little kids,” the video cuts to a short clip of a child zombie eating a corpse.

Through a red lens, we then see Hall standing on the level below the balcony, with the LYs’ legs dancing on the balcony in the background. Holding a gun that she points at the camera, Hall sings the remainder of the chorus: “If you want to survive them eating your flesh/I suggest you shoot them in the brain/You zombie killer/You zombie killer.” Nearing the end of the chorus, Hall is back on the balcony, her leg resting atop the railing as she pretends to shoot the zombies below. Short scenes of people shooting zombies in a forest from “Night” are interspersed throughout this part of the chorus as well.

Hall then raps encouragingly to the song’s unspoken audience: “Not as basic as Buffy/There can't only be one/You must gather your strength /Shooting zombies can be quite fun,” during which the LYs attempt to defeat a zombie with a broom on the porch steps. Hall sings, “Take note: they don’t run well, and they'd rather be in their home land of hell,” while she and the LYs freestyle dance in the dimly lit street with a couple zombies staggering non-aggressively from side to side behind them. Hall advises further in the art of zombie killing: “The bloody ones, shoot at first/The smell alone ain't worth the hurt/No drama here, just straight up survival/The damned are back seeking beatbox revival.” Shots

of the zombies trying to grab at feet hanging off the balcony alternate with those of Hall standing on the balcony, motioning enthusiastically.

The chorus reenters with Hall and the LYs jumping and waving in the street to the beat of the song, after which we see Hall leaning over the balcony, quickly grabbing the hands of each zombie in the same way that an onstage performer grabs the hands of their audience members. In this instance, Hall is seemingly expressing both her celebrityhood and her command over the zombies, as she grasps each of their hands in a teasing fashion as if to say “you can touch, but you can’t eat.” Further, Hall’s use of zombies as audience members can be read as a critique of celebrity and consumerism. That is, the zombie audience members are trying to consume Hall, aligning with the notion that a celebrity is a human object to be consumed. At the same time, Hall grasps the zombies’ hands in a teasing fashion, maintaining the upper hand in the celebrity/fan relationship.

Nearing the end of the chorus, the zombies are shown eating the LYs’ faces, followed by a close-up of Hall surrounded by smoke, looking intensely into the distance while pointing a gun (Figure 25). This moment harkens back to Figure 15 in chapter two from John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos*, wherein we see a close shot of Divine, who is pointing a small pistol toward the camera just as Hall does. Hall’s critique of celebrity and consumerism deepens the videos’ ties to Waters’ work, as several of his films connect celebrityhood and human monstrosity (especially sexual deviance and criminality). For example, Dawn Davenport, Divine’s character in *Female Trouble*, performs increasingly more criminal acts throughout the film, even turning such acts into a stage show in which she shoots at her audience members, killing several, just as Hall kills her zombie audience members in “Zombie Killer.” Eventually, Dawn is imprisoned for her crimes and is excited about the

death penalty, convinced that it is the best and most dramatic end for her celebrity life. The extent of behaviors Dawn is willing to engage in for mass attention implicitly critiques celebrityhood and its consumption.



Figure 25: A screenshot from Hall's original "Zombie Killer" video, in which we see Hall surrounded by smoke and pointing a gun. The camera is very close to her face.

In the final verse of "Zombie," Hall raps about the nature of the apocalypse, again providing enthusiasm for zombie killing to those she is attempting to teach: "stuck together, strangers forever united by the killers in the streets/Bloody and vicious, our minds delicious, and never enough to eat." At this point, clips of Hall and the LYs dancing on the balcony amidst the smoke are interspersed with clips of zombies eating in the streets and below the house, a crowd beginning to amass. Hall then raps straight to the camera, "Bullets by the hundred we aim for the heart but if you dot your shot right to the smart/Let's watch zombie heads explode/Shock pop lock and load," covering her heart and gesturing to her head at their respective parts of the lyric, and we again see a very quick clip from "Night" of a sheriff shooting a zombie in a field. The zombies collect on the steps

of the house, singing “shoot us in the brains,” and Hall interjects from the balcony “even the little kids!,” after which a singular zombie child appears, singing “shoot us in the brains” discordantly along with the voices of zombie children that do not appear on screen. That the zombies sing with willingness to be shot in the brains can again be read as a critique of celebrityhood and/or fandom--the celebrity is willing to do anything for attention, and the fan is willing to do anything to show their appreciation for the celebrity.

The remainder of the chorus is accompanied by a montage of Hall being devoured by zombies, dancing on the balcony with the LYs and their fake guns, and reaching through the balcony at the zombies, again shot through the red lens. On the final “you zombie killer/you zombie killer,” Hall is shown lying on the ground with her torso having been ripped open by the zombies that are hovering over her, continuing to eat. The piano outro of the song accompanies the final shot, wherein the zombies are waving back and forth on the porch, their arms outstretched. A black screen with the words “Leslie and the Ly’s ZOMBIE KILLER” appears, accompanied by the sound of film rolling and the voice of the reporter from the beginning of the video. The reporter says “the plan is, kill the brain and you kill th-,” and the video cuts out before he finishes his words, which in “Night of the Living Dead” are “kill the ghoul.” Between the Zombie Killer (i.e., Hall) having been killed off and the reporter’s instructions being cut off at the very end, this video leaves the distinct impression that the zombies, and therefore consumerism, won; the apocalypse has truly arrived, and the fat body did not survive it.

Zombie Killer 2.0

The second version of “Zombie Killer,” titled “Zombie Killer Revisited,” is similar to Hall’s original in that she is performing in front of an audience of zombies and advising the

audience of the video on how to kill zombies. However, “Revisited” is in color instead of black and white, and instead of a house-party-sized audience, she is shown performing in a large stadium in front of a large crowd. Further, instead of incorporating clips from Romero, Hall only loosely refers to his work in that the way she depicts the killing of zombies is similarly campy and explicit. In addition to the slight relationship between this “Zombie” and the Romero films, it also heavily engages with not only the independent horror film genre, but the specifically Midwest independent horror film scene. This connection is obvious in several ways. Firstly, featured as front-row zombies in the video are Mark Borchardt and Mike Shank, the subjects of the 1999 documentary *American Movie*, which follows blue-collar film maker Borchardt and his best friend (Shank) through the long and strugglesome process of producing the independent horror film, *Coven* (1997). Borchardt and Shank reside in suburban Wisconsin, their Midwestern accents highly notable throughout the documentary. Because of Borchardt’s chronic unemployment and borderline alcoholism, he has very little money to work with in creating *Coven* and therefore recruits the volunteer efforts of friends and family members for the filming, acting, and editing of the film. This enlisting of loved ones is something Hall’s and Borchardt’s work have in common, because aside from some of the featured actors in the “Willow” and “Zombie Killer Revisited” videos, Hall’s videos and live performances are all made up of her friends and family members, and Hall frequently mentions her mother as being her costume designer.

Hall’s connection to both internet celebrityhood and independent Midwest film is further deepened by the fact that the video was produced by Special Entertainment, a Milwaukee-based media production company created by Bobby Ciraldo and Andrew

Swant, who also directed the “Zombie” video. Ciraldo and Swant are not only based in the Midwest, but they are also well known in the internet community for having created the 2007 viral video “What What (In the Butt)” featuring Samwell, who wrote the song featured in the video and was launched into internet celebrityhood by it.

“Zombie Killer Revisited” opens to shadows staggering toward the entrance of the “Elvira Mistress of the Dark” stadium. As the words “Leslie & the LYs” scroll across the marquee, we are zoomed through the stadium entrance to see an audience of zombies, arms outstretched and waving at the stage. The same piano chords as the earlier “Zombie” video enter, but this time, horror hostess Elvira talks through the introduction, saying: “As the sun sets, the earth is still/Yet from the graves, a rumble builds/From their crypts, and from the dark/To every house, and trailer park/Shadows creep across the plains, as the dead arise and lust for brains/Maggots feast on rotting flesh, your hood is filled with deaths foul stench.”

By the time Elvira is on her last line, the camera has taken us all the way forward to the stage, where we see Hall, facing away from the audience. The sole spotlight is focused on her back, highlighting the huge image of her face sequined onto the back of the cape Hall is wearing (Figure 26). That Hall is wearing clothing with her own face on it reminds us of the cover of the ceWEBrity album discussed in the first chapter, wherein Hall is holding three versions of herself in her hand. Therefore, the cape is likely a means of helping Hall take up more space and an indication of celebrity narcissism. The facial expression on the cape is grotesque, and soon Hall greets us with a face equally grotesque (Figure 27). She begins to sing about the plight of the undead, giving advice on how best to deal with them, just as she did in the earlier version of the video. This time, her characteristic blue eye

shadow has reached new heights, truly echoing the fashion of Divine. Her gold lamé outfit has a Star Trek quality to it and is bedazzled with many gold sequins, and she wears a headset microphone just like the one for which Britney Spears is notorious.

Just as in the previous video, the first verse alternates between showing Hall singing onstage and the zombie audience, with occasional close-ups of zombies eating human body parts. Hall pretends to reach for the hands of the zombies, similar to the previous video where she touches the zombies' hands through the balcony, although in this case she never actually touches them, making the "connection" between fan and celebrity appear even more superficial. Right before the chorus, as Hall sings about stocking up on "lots of wood and silky pajamas," the LYs are brought to the stage through a trapdoor, both wearing shiny purple outfits and sunglasses and swaying with arms outstretched as if they were zombies. Each has an "instrument" strapped to her shoulders--one a keytar and the other a fake turntable.



Figure 26: Hall wears a cape featuring a sequined image of her face, which is making a grotesque expression. Screenshot from "Zombie Killer Revisited" on YouTube.



Figure 27: Hall's opening face in "Zombie Killer Revisited" is grotesque. Screenshot from "Zombie Killer Revisited" on YouTube.

The video that accompanies the chorus shows front and side views of Hall freestyle dancing, the LYs pretending to casually play their instruments, and images of the zombie "audience," including Borchardt and Shank. At each point when the camera zooms close to Hall's face, she is making over-the-top expressions that border on grotesque, her hair mysteriously becoming more disheveled throughout. At the end of the second appearance of the chorus, one of the LYs nudges the other and takes a gun out of the back of her pants and begins shooting at the zombies. The other LY follows suit as Hall raps about aiming "for the smart," and we then see a close-up of Hall's grotesque facial expressions once again.

With a maniacal look on her face, Hall then reaches for a large gun from the back of her pants. Aiming for the audience, Hall shoots her machine gun rapidly (which is likely a large water gun in reality) at the audience, maintaining her maniacal face as her bullets hit the zombie audience members square in the forehead. During this scene, the voice of Elvira re-enters, stating: "You can run, but you can't hide/Just do your best to stay alive/Now I ain't Vincent, and this ain't 'Thriller'/You've just become a zombie killer," after which the

chorus enters for the final time. Hall continues to shoot the zombies, making gleefully grotesque facial expressions and a “chu-ching” motion when she takes them down. On the final words “zombie killer,” Hall looks straight into the camera and mouths the words, after which she is shown shooting off into the sky via jetpack as the LYs, arms outstretched, sink down through the stage via the trapdoor. We can hear what sounds like the zombies cheering for Hall as she flies into the sky. That Hall launches into space again positions her as both terrestrial and extraterrestrial monster. In addition, that Hall is able to escape the zombies so easily seemingly nods to the privilege of celebrity--she can give advice and then rocket away. As Hall hits the stars, a half-bloody “Zombie Killer” album cover flies into the shot with pictures of Elvira and Hall on it.

As previously stated, there are several aesthetic differences between the two versions of “Zombie Killer.” The original is shot in black and white, contains scenes from “Night of the Living Dead,” and features a low production quality. By contrast, “Revisited” is in color, includes many special effects (such as Hall jetpacking into the sky), and contains all original footage. In addition to Elvira’s monologues creating lyrical difference, “Revisited” differs lyrically from the original version in that the line “even the little kids” is omitted, and accordingly, the video contains no child zombies. Although it is unclear why Hall made this decision, it is likely because she garnered a child audience somewhere along the line (which culminated in her appearances on the children’s television show “Yo Gabba Gabba!”), and did not want to scare her child fans. Nevertheless, upwards of twenty YouTube commenters expressed remorse over the loss of the “even the little kids” line.

Another significant difference between the two “Zombie Killer” videos is in their cultural influences. As mentioned previously, the original version is heavily influenced by

Night of the Living Dead, even including footage from the film. The second version, in addition to its connections to Midwest independent horror, also seems to be influenced by the music video for Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. This is partially obvious in some of Hall's dance moves and the '80s-esque clothing worn by the LYs, but is made even more explicit when Elvira says she isn't "Vincent" (i.e., Vincent Price, who did the voiceover to *Thriller*) and "this ain't *Thriller*." Further, the simple act of having a music video about zombies that includes a voiceover by a horror host is similar to *Thriller* in and of itself.

In addition to the aesthetics and influences of each version, the narratives of the videos are different. Specifically, in the first version, Hall is eaten by zombies at the end. While, like many horror films, the fat person (i.e., Hall) was not the first to die as is common in the horror genre, she did still depict herself as vulnerable, having put on a big show of demonstrating zombie apocalypse survival techniques only to be taken down in the end. By contrast, "Revisited" portrays Hall as the hero--she advises on how to take care of the zombies but never lets herself be eaten by them. At the same time that Hall positions herself as savior of the zombie apocalypse, she does not do so by proving her own humanness. Instead, she plays up her own monstrosity with tight clothing, increasingly disheveled hair, and maniacally grotesque faces, in effect refusing and refuting normal humanness.

The narrative of "Revisited" also challenges the conventions of the horror genre. For example, women are often objects of horror films—those being chased by the monster or killer of the plot—whereas men are posited as the defender. In fact, a male defending a woman in the face of a zombie attack is the plotline of "Thriller." Michael Jackson is both a protector of his frightened female date as well as at times a zombie himself (and also a

werewolf--it's kind of unclear). Near the end of the video, Jackson's date runs into an abandoned house and zombies—including zombie Michael Jackson—break through the walls to attack her. She is the sole object under attack. "Zombie Killer Revisited," on the other hand, while in some ways influenced by "Thriller," seems to deliberately champion femininity over masculinity. While Hall is the focus of the video, she is not under threat of attack and instead serves as defender. In addition, the male voice of Vincent Price in "Thriller" is replaced by the female voice of Elvira, so when she states "now I'm not Vincent, and this ain't 'Thriller,' you've just become a zombie killer" it is as if to say "this is a feminist version of *Thriller*; a fat woman just taught you how to take on the zombie apocalypse."

In addition to challenging the overwhelming masculinity of the horror genre, Hall also pushes back against horror tropes regarding fat people. Instead of allowing herself to be "the first to go" or the object of consumption for her flesh-craving audience, she puts herself in charge, killing off zombies with almost too much ease and pleasure. She positions herself as entertainer, teacher, and savior, but without needing to prove her humanness. For Hall, maintaining her humanness in the face of the zombie apocalypse is not important like it is in other zombie narratives, such as in *The Walking Dead*, wherein the characters often question whether they can "come back" to humanness after having to commit acts of violence in order to survive the apocalypse. Instead, Hall is already deliberately liminal, monstrous, fat, and freakishly feminine, yet unscathed from the terrors of the zombie apocalypse.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways that Hall plays on and challenges American cultural narratives regarding size and monstrosity. Having given an overview of societal

constructions of monstrosity and the role such constructions play in defining humanness, as well as the perception of fatness as entertaining monstrosity in U.S. culture, I showed the significance of the ways that Hall calls attention to her size. Further, through my analyses of “Blame the Booty LIVE,” “Tight Pants (Body Rolls),” and the two “Zombie Killer” videos, I demonstrated that Hall’s work not only pushes against societal pressures to become thinner or conceal fatness but also the cultural need to display humanness, as defined by cultural constructions of monstrosity. Further, I explored the similarities between representations of zombies and rhetoric surrounding fatness in the United States, showing that both are seen as monstrously extraordinary and monstrously ordinary at the same time.

Afterword

My purpose in writing this dissertation has been to call attention to stereotypes regarding the Midwest just as Hall does. While regional identities can be seen as sources of pride, representing particular regions as monolithic can erase a multitude of personal and cultural identities. To that end, my other aim was to explore the queer experiences that do take place in the Midwest, despite the region being generally depicted as boring and heteronormative. Again, situating the Midwest as a place mutually exclusive to queerness or any form of non-normativity or unconventionality erases the queers that do live there, and could potentially reinforce any homophobia that exists in the region. To take this notion of disrupting the Midwest's assumed normativity a step further, I showed how Hall renders the Midwest not only queer but monstrous as well. The ways that she exploits her own alleged monstrosity resists stereotypes of the region as normative, and also pushes back against American tropes about fatness, wherein fat bodies are seen to be weakening the strength of the nation. Hall's queer, fat, monstrous Midwest is a stark contrast to the region we see on television. In reminding us that the Midwest is the region that brought us *American Movie* and "What What (in the Butt)," Hall effectively positions the Midwest as a place in which we can all be weird, ordinary, and famous.

I felt compelled to write a dissertation on Leslie Hall for manifold reasons. When I was first introduced to Hall's work, I thought she was kind of funny but very weird--I didn't quite get the joke. Upon further exposure to her work, however, I began to see how smart it was, not despite its weirdness, but because of it. Being from the Midwest myself, I never quite thought of myself as having a regional identity or being from "somewhere," as the region and its associated whiteness felt largely unmarked. However, in moving across the

country to Seattle and feeling like a deeply uncool small fish in a big pond, I began to see the ways in which the Midwestern region was indeed “marked,” and the ways in which I was marked by it. To write a dissertation regarding Midwest stereotypes is perhaps to come full circle from not seeing the Midwest as having culture at all.

In addition to beginning to view myself as part of Midwestern culture, this dissertation has also inadvertently been a means of fighting back for my former self’s existence. That is, when I lived in the Midwest, and especially at the college I now refer to as “the cornfield,” I did not see my existence as belonging there, particularly because I did not see many people like me, and because of the limited number of visible models, those that I did see often stuck out like sore, poorly dressed thumbs. In Leslie Hall’s work, however, I see myself. Hall’s gaggle of queers wreaks havoc on Ames; they get sparkly and take the minivan to the video store and the dive bar to see and be seen; they make excitement out of the only activities that are really available: mundane ones such as snacking and crafting. That this representation of Midwestern queerness is so exciting to me reminds us that representation is deeply important.

In reflecting on my approximately three years of research and writing on her work, I find that, as I hoped in choosing this topic, I am not yet bored of Leslie Hall. That said, there have been times when I have been disappointed in her, just as one would in spending three years with any given person. While I find most of Hall’s work to be a radical celebration of Otherness, there are times when the politics she conveys fall short of my own ideologies. One major example of this is her performance at Michfest (as I discussed in chapter three); while I understand that “a girl’s gotta eat” and that Hall is one to take advantage of opportunities, this is one instance in which I wished she had just stayed home. Further,

while I see Hall's gay wedding business as making a mockery of the institution of marriage, at the same time I can think of several other forms of support for queer fans I would rather see from Hall (e.g., supporting the work of other queer artists, being vocal about the systemic oppression of queer people of color and especially trans people, boycotting Michfest because of its transmisogyny).

Intervention (Not The Reality TV Show)

Aside from seeing my queer Midwestern self in Hall's work, I also felt urged to write this dissertation because I have seen little work done on the culture of the internet and its imagined communities. The internet has become a mysterious yet omnipresent cultural and commercial utility that most people participate in and to some degree have opinions about, but is at the same time too vast for any lay person to truly comprehend. As such, I wanted to think critically about the online rhetoric used to describe the internet, and to use one particular internet celebrity as a case study in the rise of internet celebrityhood and the narratives initially used to support internet celebrity as a concept (e.g., the "ordinary celebrity" narrative I discussed in chapter one). Hall is the perfect case study for considering rhetoric about the internet because, just as with all things (Midwestern femininity, monstrosity, etc.), she exaggerates the ordinary celebrity and internet-as-community narratives, bringing them to the fore and to some degree, putting them in question.

In addition to contributing to scholarship on internet celebrityhood and the "ordinary celebrity" narrative, this dissertation also critically analyzes music videos (and in particular DIY music videos) from the perspectives of queer, monstrosity, and fat studies. Further contributing to music video studies, this dissertation has also considered the

relationship between music videos and geography. I am sure that many music videos, mainstream and not, have depicted rural areas, but from what I can tell, rarely have scholars attended to representations of regional American identities in music video. My analysis of Hall's work from a regional scholarship perspective sets the stage for others to consider regional representations and identities in music video.

Some Topics Left Behind

In every academic project, we necessarily have to leave some topics behind, or even begin to follow threads that do not seem to easily fit into the quilt that is your dissertation, book, or journal article. This dissertation is no different, and there are many threads I woefully abandoned, but that leave room for future work. One issue that I wish I had delved into more is race, particularly with regard to genre. Although I discussed at length the white, blue-collar Midwestern femininity Hall that camps, in future work I hope to further consider the implications of Hall framing herself as a hip-hop artist. I would like to think through the histories of the various genres from which Hall draws (hip-hop, disco, country), and analyze whether her music is merely culturally appropriative in its use of genres from communities of color, or whether there is a more nuanced read to be had. I have toyed with the idea that Hall uses hip-hop to show what an "uncool" white Midwesterner she is, the contrast between the hip-hop genre and Hall's whiteness allowing the latter to become embarrassingly obvious. At the same time, Hall is pretty good at rapping, making this self-mockery seem somewhat less likely.

In addition to furthering my analysis of Hall's performance of whiteness through hip-hop, I also want to connect Hall's work to other grotesque styles of drag. Although I spent some time comparing Hall's work with that of John Waters' drag star, Divine, a full-

scale comparison could shed further light on each artists' critique of celebrityhood, consumption, and social conventions for humanness and femininity. Further, this comparison with Divine, who is considered to be part of the "tranimal" or "terrorist drag" genre of drag, could reveal Hall's connections to other drag queens who work in that genre. One such example is the Seattle-based queen Dina Martina who, similarly to Hall, performs one-woman shows she writes herself. Dina Martina's work does not revolve around appearance or passing as a woman as some other styles of drag (e.g., pageant drag) do, but instead Dina exaggerates her femininity while also directing our attention to the ways she falls short of conventional femininity through revealing her body hair, removing her wig, or eating grotesquely. Dina's look is eerily similar to Divine's and Hall's in that she overdoes her blue eyeshadow, as well as her bright red lipstick (Figure 28). In short, there's really something about blue eyeshadow, and I am determined to one day get to the bottom of it.

On the topic of animality, one avenue I did not take but in which I remain interested is Hall's relationship to and portrayal of non-human animals, especially cats. Images of cats appear in several of her music videos, including "Craft Talk." Further, Hall has an entire song dedicated her cat, entitled "#1 Cat in America," which obviously ranks Hall's cat above all other cats in the United States. The lyrics describe the ways Hall and the cat interact and make observations about him. When I saw Hall perform this song in 2014, a large background of a cat face was draped behind Hall, exaggerating his importance in the world. Further, in "Your Not Taken," Hall sings to her crush "I'm positive you're a pessimist but I could be wrong on that/But that wouldn't change my feelings, unless you hated my cat." Here, the cat is positioned as above any love interests, claiming Hall as a "crazy cat lady" even without saying so. Several critical animal studies scholars have written about

interspecies intimacies, framing such intimacies as a form of queer kinship (Weaver 2015; McKeithen 2017), and it would be interesting to read Hall's declared obsession with her cat through that lens, connecting to the many ways she portrays both queerness and failed femininities.



Figure 28: Dina Martina, in overdone blue eyeshadow, blush, and red lipstick, looks inquisitively at a variety of decorated cupcakes. Photo from Out.com.

While my main interest in this dissertation was with Hall's queer fan base, I am interested in considering why Hall's other main fan base was children in future work. In studying Hall's social media, I found plenty of instances where parents tagged Hall to show how their child had dressed up as Hall for Halloween or other occasions. That her cameo on *Yo Gabba Gabba!* turned into a tour with the live show clearly demonstrates that Hall is well liked by children. Further, in thinking about what children and queers have in common, it is possible that these particular demographics enjoy and relate to Hall's work for very similar reasons. What comes to mind is that both demographics have interest in

monstrosity. Because queers are outliers, their connection to monstrosity is clear. Children, on the other hand, are not inherently viewed as non-normative, but many children's shows, movies, and books frame children as being uniquely equipped for building relationships with monsters. For example, in *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (1982), a young boy (Elliott) discovers and befriends the alien, protecting him from the rest of the terrestrial world as long as he can. Their relationship is so connected that when *E.T.* begins to fall ill, so does Elliott. Many similar relationships are depicted in children's movies, including the special relationship between the child and the monster James P. Sullivan in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), between Jesse and Willy in *Free Willy* (1993), and plenty others. While I have yet to research the topic, I speculate that children's media and literature often involves monsters because children are seen as innocent from adult prejudice, and also because it is important to teach self-acceptance to children, which can be achieved by teaching them about "difference" in general through monsters and animals.

In addition to discussions of race, drag, and interspecies intimacies, I would like to develop my analyses of Hall's work with regard to fame and celebrityhood. While I discussed Hall's ordinary celebrityhood and some of her critiques of celebrity, I am also interested in considering her relationship to specific mainstream celebrities. For example, I was only able to scrape the surface of the similarities between Leslie Hall and Lady Gaga, and a full-scale comparison of the ways fame, monstrosity, and motherhood appear in each artist's work would further develop my analysis of the queer relationship to fame and what that should look like in a hyper-commercialistic era. I also was only able to briefly mention Hall's connection to the character *Roseanne*, but there is much more to be said about the very specific type of fat, white, bossy Midwestern femininity they both portray. In addition

to Roseanne, basically every character Melissa McCarthy portrays is “bossy,” and this is especially evident in her 2016 film *The Boss*. Although it is not entirely clear to me why the association between fatness is bossiness is so widespread, it likely has something to do with taking up space and failing at femininity; instead of being small and subservient, these characters are fat and in charge—a scary notion in a culture where fat bodies are supposed to be vulnerable and attempting to disappear.

Leslie Hall: Our Past and Our Future

A few months prior to the time of writing (June 2018), Leslie Hall began to reach out to the internet again, but through a different avenue—Facebook and YouTube Live. Hall initially was somewhat mysterious about her new project, simply posting on Facebook a few days before each live appearance, with vague captions like “May 6th 6 pm central gonna tap that internet” to accompany a short video of her. After one full episode and a couple short test videos, Hall released a name for her new project: “Yarn House Live.” After the first episode, it became clear that these videos would be a weird new version of telethons; Hall stands in front of a cardboard barn with a live studio audience of locals, asking people on the internet to visit her online store and buy her art so she can purchase more equipment to continue creating live videos. During these telethons, Hall takes calls from viewers, often teasing them, refusing to answer their questions, and hanging up on them. Hall employs the same gaggle of friends to assist with these shows as she did with Leslie and the LYs, with the addition of a stuffed chicken named Ribbons, who acts as Hall’s co-host.

Eventually, Hall created a website to provide more clarity as to what her project entailed. It was clear by the visual quality (or lack thereof) of the telethons that Hall was

using outdated equipment when she just as easily could have used a smartphone to film the show. The “What is this?” description on the site provided the reason why. It states:

In 2014 a 1998 analog tv studio went up for auction from Iowa State. It was purchased site unseen with the idea we could rebuild it and make a show for people to watch. While it was sitting in a storage unit, internet streaming happened so now we are trying to use a lil old with alot of new.

Everyone working on the show has never produced a live streaming show before so the technical difficulties you are seeing are real. They are not even getting paid, I told them free drink and chips so please enjoy the charm.

During the live streaming shows we will be pushing our items in the store, purchases and donations go towards equipment. (Yarn House Live 2018)

That Hall has created a new show that utilizes technology from the 1990s shows that her commitment to the DIY and being bad on purpose continues. Not only does Hall use a somewhat outdated way of earning money (i.e. the telethon), but she uses outdated equipment to do it, lending the telethon anachronistic authenticity. Further, Hall’s mention of the real technical difficulties show that she is not only unafraid to fail, but failure is her modus operandi. The technical difficulties are very obvious to audience members. For example, in the May 6th episode, Hall’s friends that run the production side of the show left their microphones on. Because of this, the viewers heard all of their conversations, including their troubleshooting why Facebook Live was not working and proclaiming that no one was buying anything and they needed to end the show. The show is clearly not pre-rehearsed, as Hall and others provide direction throughout in a way that makes it clear that they are basically winging it, again making it clear that Hall’s shtick is at least partly built upon trying out new projects and technologies and seeing what happy accidents arise.

An interesting irony about Hall’s “Yarn House Live” is that Hall loves the internet, but elects to crowdfund via telethon instead of a crowdsourcing site such as GoFundMe.

Between the telethon format and the 1990s equipment, “Yarn House Live” treats its audience to a healthy dose of nostalgia. Hall’s use of the seemingly burdensome equipment defies the notion that the internet is for easily-made amateur video or other on-the-go amateur media; Hall could far more easily film the show from her iPhone, but opts instead for outdated studio television equipment. The visual difference between such equipment and smartphone and other contemporary technologies continues Hall’s portrayal of the Midwest as an historical one; “Yarn House Live” implies that the Midwest is so stuck in the past that its technology is twenty years old.

That Hall has turned to such outdated technologies feels like a defiance of the glossy commercialism of the present internet landscape. While Hall came about in a time when internet celebrityhood was probably 25% effort and 75% happy accidents, current internet celebrityhood is based on algorithms and calculated follows and tags. The internet has been imbued with such commercialism and self-celebrification that the notion of an internet celebrity has become so vast as to almost mean nothing. That is, if so many social media users are now using those platforms predominantly to achieve fame, then that turns the imagined community of amateurs into more of a social marketplace. This increased tie between internet celebrityhood and commercialism is evidenced in a relatively new concept for marketing: influencer marketing, in which the focus is on an influential person (mainstream celebrities or internet personalities with a significant number of followers) instead of the general public. Companies will pay “social media influencers” to use and advertise their products or services, exploiting the relationship between the influencer and their followers. As the Influencer Marketing Hub website states of the concept: “It is important to note that these individuals are not simply marketing tools, but rather social

relationship assets with which brands can collaborate to achieve their marketing objectives” (Influencer Marketing Hub, Accessed June 2018). The very notion of “social relationship assets” indicates that the internet we use today is not what we used ten years ago—the “community” has become commercialized such that social media relationships are considered assets. The hashtag star killed the ordinary celebrity.

In contrast, Leslie Hall appears to continue fighting the good internet fight. In a time when her videos of ten years ago seem like they belong to the ancient history of the internet, Hall has elected to go back further in time instead of participate in the present, and many of the commenters on her telethons, while puzzled, seem simply excited to have Hall back on the internet. This leads me to wonder, how many internet users long for the time when the internet was not so inundated with commercialism and advertising? How many are bored of being “influenced” and long for the seeming randomness of the internet past? It seems like only a matter of time until nostalgia for the early internet spreads widely. And as an obscure, historic internet celebrity who already deals in anachronisms, Hall is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of internet nostalgia. And when that happens, I will be ready.

WORKS CITED

- "40 Greatest Internet Superstars. March 2007. *VH1*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20070329020809/http://webjunk.tv/archives/2007/03/20_leslie_hall_gem.php>
- "About the Dr." Accessed 20 August 2016. <<http://www.dremento.com/dr-bio.html>>
- "About YouTube." *YouTube*. Accessed 22 August 2016.
<<https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/>>
- "About." ChicAGoGo Show. *Facebook*. Accessed 23 September 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/chicagogo/about/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info>
- Abrams, Brett L. 2004. "Icons." *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America*, ed. Marc Stein. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Advocate.com Editors. 2007. "Leslie Hall and the world of Internet camp." *The Advocate*. Accessed 22 November 2017. <<https://www.advocate.com/news/2007/03/19/leslie-hall-and-world-internet-camp>>
- Altman, Dennis. 1971. *Homosexual; oppression and liberation*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey.
- Andres, Tommy. 18 September 2009. "Quirky Iowa rapper gaining ce-Web-rity status." CNN Entertainment. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/09/18/leslie.hall/index.html>
- Arnold, Gina et. al. 2017. *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA.
- Backstrom, Laura. 2012. "From the Freak Show to the Living Room: Cultural Representations of Dwarfism and Obesity." *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 3: 682-707.
- Bergman, David. 1993. *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Biamonte, Nicole. 2011. *Pop-culture Pedagogy in the Music Classroom: Teaching Tools from American Idol to YouTube*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.
- Biltekoff, Charlotte. 2007. "The Terror Within: Obesity in Post 9/11 U.S. Life." *American Studies* 48, no. 3: 29-48.

- Birkey, Andy. 2014. "So much gold, so many gems, and the #1 cat in America." *The Column*. Accessed 21 November 2017. <<http://thecolu.mn/11358/leslie-lys>>
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Braziel, Jana Evans and LeBesco, Kathleen. 2001. *Bodies Out of Bounds Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bronski, Michael. 1984. *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Briefel, Aviva, and Miller, Sam J. 2011. *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brown, Gavin. 2008. "Urban (Homo)Sexualities: Ordinary Cities and Ordinary Sexualities." *Geography Compass*, 2(4).
- Browne, K. 2009. Imagining Cities, Living the Other: Between the Gay Urban Idyll and Rural Lesbian Lives. *The Open Geography Journal*, 1(1).
- Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green. 2009. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Polity.
- Carlin, Patricia. 2014. *How to Make Your Cat an Internet Celebrity: A Guide to Financial Freedom*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books.
- Caroso, Luciano. 2015. "Ethnomusicology in Cyberspace: Samplertropofagia and Virality in YouTube Videos." *Made in Brazil: Studies in Popular Music*, eds. Ulhôa, Martha, Azevedo, Cláudia, and Trotta, Felipe. New York: Routledge.
- Cayton, Andrew R. L., and Gray, Susan E. 2001. *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*. *Midwestern History and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Click, Melissa, Hyunji Lee, and Holly Willson Holladay. 2013. "Making Monsters: Lady Gaga, Fan Identification, and Social Media." *Popular Music and Society* 36(3).
- Clum, John M. 1999. *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Cohen, Alex. 13 March 2008. "Taking Over the World One Sweater at a Time." *NPR*. Accessed 10 June 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88180688>>

Constan, Randy. "The Home page of Randy Constan." Accessed 24 August 2016.
<pixyland.org>

Cusick, Suzanne. 1999. "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex." *Audible traces: gender, identity, and music*, eds. Barkin, Elaine, Lydia Hamessley, and Benjamin Boretz. Carciofoli Verlagshaus

Devitt, Rachel. 2006. "Girl on Girl: Fat Femmes, Bio-Queens, and Redefining Drag." *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Whiteley, Sheila, and Rycenga, Jennifer. New York: Routledge.

Dolan, Emily I. 2010. "'... This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth': Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity." *Popular Music* 29(3).

Duffy, Craig. February 24, 2013. "Pink Flamingos."
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/pinkcowphotography/8505558721>>

DungeonMajesty. "Willow Don't Cry," YouTube Video, 5:20, March 22, 2007,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK9GPTY3dM8>.

Dyer, Richard. 1986. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Eng, David L. 2010. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection. Durham: Duke University Press.

Erbentraut, Joe. August 17, 2011. "My Chicago: Leslie Hall, Iowa's Own Midwest Diva." *Huffington Post*. < https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/16/my-chicago-leslie-hall-io_n_928577.html>

Farmer, Brett. 2005. "The Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship." *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 20, no. 59 [2]: 164-95.

Farrell, Amy Erdman. 2011. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

FBE. "YouTubers React to Tight Pants / Body Rolls," YouTube Video, 8:33, August 16, 2015,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAdM9xf7cbk>.

Fleischer, Rubin. 2009. *Zombieland*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975*. New York, NY: Picador.

Frith, Simon, Goodwin, Andrew, and Grossberg, Lawrence. 1993. *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*. London; New York: Routledge.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 1996. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press.

- Garry, Greg. July 3, 2014. "Dina Martina, Queen of Pee Town." *OUT*. <<https://www.out.com/entertainment/interviews/2014/07/03/dina-martina-queen-provincetown-seattle-drag>>
- Gdula, Steve. 11 Nov. 2005. "Happy Madonna day!" *Advocate*. Accessed 09 Dec. 2012. <http://web.archive.org/web/20061119044955/http://www.advocate.com/exclusive_detail_ektid22479.asp>
- Ha, Peter. 7 January 2008. "Exclusive: Mozilla Secretary Launches A Viral Campaign for Firefox." Accessed 17 August 2016. <<https://techcrunch.com/2008/01/07/exclusive-mozilla-secretly-launches-a-viral-campaign-for-firefox/>>
- Halberstam, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harjunen, Hannele. 2017. *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body*. Routledge Research in Gender and Society. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Harris, Daniel. 1997. *The rise and fall of gay culture*. New York: Hyperion.
- Hayes, Eileen. 2010. *Songs in black and lavender: race, sexual politics, and women's music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Heckerling, Amy. 1995. *Clueless*. Paramount Home Entertainment.
- Howard, Ron and Lucas, George. 1988. *Willow*. Lucasfilm Ltd.
- Influencer Marketing Hub. "What Is an Influencer?" Accessed 2 June 2018. <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>>
- Jacobson, Marion. January 25, 2015. "The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Ukulele." *The Atlantic*. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/01/though-it-be-little-the-rise-of-the-ukulele/384453/>>
- Jennex, Craig. 2013. "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia." *Popular Music and Society*, 36(3), 343-359.
- Jung, Eun-Young. 2014. "Transnational Migrations and YouTube Sensations: Korean Americans, Popular Music, and Social Media." *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 1: 54-82.
- Kless, Larry. 23 April 2013. "8 Years Ago Today, This Boring Video Upload Started A Revolution." *tubularinsights*. Accessed 24 September 2016. <<http://tubularinsights.com/me-at-the-zoo/>>
- Kole, Allison and Gallgher, Devin. 2011. *Married in Spandex*. Snag Films.

Lauro, Sarah Juliet, and Embry, Karen. 2008. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 35, no. 1: 85-108.

lesliehall. "First Television appearance," YouTube Video, 9:59, August 11, 2006.

_____. "HOW WE GO OUT VERSION 2," YouTube Video, 3:44, November 8, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8WoyPEVRFo>.

_____. "Zombie Killer Revisited," YouTube Video, 3:43, February 16, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbDcN2gZCwU>.

_____. "Craft Talk," YouTube Video, 3:37, March 3, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWVzIfUfjGk&t=109s>.

_____. "Blame The Booty LIVE," YouTube Video, 4:18, August 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWWtQvX-6N4>.

_____. "Tight Pants / Body Rolls," YouTube Video, 3:00, February 1, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1c2KzJbcGA>.

_____. "Gravel In My Shoe," YouTube Video, 2:40, February 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG6Qc9ITeAQ>.

_____. "Destination Friendship Tour Teaser," YouTube Video, 0:32, February 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBxouQLTgJU>.

Liebelson, Dana. 28 March 2014. "MAP: Here are the countries that block Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube." *Mother Jones*. Accessed 21 August 2016. <<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/03/turkey-facebook-youtube-twitter-blocked>>

Love Drunk, "#75 Leslie Hall: Your Not Taken," YouTube Video, 2:59, May 8, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DJtRi5_Lfg.

Loy, Amy. 2014. *Videocy/Idiocy: I Am in That Weird Part of YouTube*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

"Madonna Sued: Russian Anti-Gay Groups Sue Pop Star for Over \$10 Million." 18 Aug. 2012. *Huffington Post*. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/18/madonna-sued-russia-st-petersburg-concert_n_1803061.html>

Marks, Craig, and Tannenbaum, Rob. 2011. *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution*. New York: Dutton.

McKeithen, Will. 2017. "Queer Ecologies of Home: Heteronormativity, Speciesism, and the Strange Intimacies of Crazy Cat Ladies." *Gender, Place & Culture* 24(1).

Milstead, Frances. 2001. Heffernan, Kevin, and Yeager, Steve. *My Son Divine*. 1st ed. Los Angeles, Calif.: Alyson Books.

"Mimi Bobeck." *The Drew Carey Show Wiki*. Accessed 2 February 2018.
<http://thedrewcareyshow.wikia.com/wiki/Mimi_Bobek>

Mobley, Jennifer-Scott. 2014. *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

_____. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

Myrdahl, Tiffany. 2013. "Ordinary (small) cities and LGBTQ lives." *ACME*, 12(2), 279-304. November 23, 2004.

Logsdon, Nate. November 29, 2009. "Leslie Hall: The Queen of Ames Music." *Ames Progressive*. <<http://amesprogressive.org/2009/11/29/issue/leslie-hall-the-queen-of-ames-music/>>

O'Malley, Gavin. 21 July 2006. "YouTube is the Fastest Growing Website." *Advertising Age*. Accessed 28 August 2016. <<http://adage.com/article/digital/youtube-fastest-growing-website/110632>>

O'Neill, LeAnn. "Love me some Leslie and the Ly's." Accessed 07 June 2018.
<<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/174796029257346100/>>

Osborne, Karen and Spurlin, William J. 1996. *Reclaiming the heartland : Lesbian and gay voices from the Midwest*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

"Our Mission." *Born This Way Foundation*. Accessed 09 Dec. 2012.
<<http://bornthiswayfoundation.org/pages/our-mission/>>

"Our Mission." *One Iowa*. Accessed 02 November, 2017. <<https://oneiowa.org/about/>>

Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Railton, Diane and Watson, Paul. 2011. *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Raisborough, Jayne. 2011. *Lifestyle Media and the Formation of the Self*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robertson, Pamela. 1996. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rony, Fatimah Tobing. 1996. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ross, Andrew. 1989. *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Rudolph, Thomas E., and Frankel, James. 2009. *YouTube in Music Education*. New York: Hal Leonard Books.
- Rugseth, Gro, and Gunn Helene Engelsrud. 2017. "Staging Fatness." *Fat Studies* 6, no. 3: 281-93.
- Seeger, Anthony. 1987. *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. *Cambridge Studies in Ethnomusicology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shortridge, James R. 1989. *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Smith, Chris and Price, Sarah. 2000. *American Movie*. Sony Pictures Classics. Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Video.
- Snares, Josh. "'Shake Your Hips' – A Leslie Hall Fan Video," YouTube Video, 2:47, September 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzRhaPgocT4>.
- Sontag, Susan. 1964. "Notes on Camp."
- spacelab150. "We Are the Web," YouTube Video, 2:38, August 6, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VrCCpaEoxI>.
- Spade, Dean. 2011. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.
- Strangelove, Michael. 2010. *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. University of Toronto Press.
- thirdanddelaware. November 26, 2009. "Roseanne, The Queen of Hearts." <<https://thirdanddelaware.tumblr.com/post/258471238/s4e08>>
- _____. January 27, 2010. "Roseanne's Bejeweled Sweater." <<https://thirdanddelaware.tumblr.com/post/356823988/s7e09>>

- Thomson, Deborah Morrison. 2009. "Big Food and the Body Politics of Personal Responsibility." *Southern Communication Journal* 74(1).
- Thorne, Russ. January 13, 2012. "The Rise of the Ukulele." *GuitarPlanet Magazine*. <<http://www.guitarplanet.eu/the-rise-of-the-ukulele.html>>
- ThreadBanger. "LESLIE HALL, HOW TO MAKE A GEM SWEATER, THREADBANGER," YouTube Video, 4:25, December 17, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6Vjfo9yjEY>.
- Turner, Graeme. 2010. *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Two Dykes and a Mic. March 29, 2009. "Our guest: Gay Icon – Leslie, of Leslie and the Lys." Accessed 24 April 2018. <<https://twodykesandamic.wordpress.com/2009/03/29/our-guest-gay-icon-leslie-of-leslie-and-the-lys/>>
- Van Leer, David. 2012. *The Queening of America*. Taylor and Francis.
- Vernallis, Carol. 2004. *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- _____. 2013. *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waters, John. 1972. *Pink Flamingos*. Dreamland Films.
- _____. 1974. *Female Trouble*. Dreamland Films.
- Weaver, Harlan. 2015. "Pit Bull Promises: Inhuman Intimacies and Queer Kinships in an Animal Shelter." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21(2).
- Wekker, Gloria. 2006. *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- "Weird Live Review: Lesile [sic] and the LYs." *The Weirdest Band in the World*. Accessed 19 November, 2017. <<https://weirdestbandintheworld.com/2014/03/06/weird-live-review-lesile-and-the-lys/>>
- "What's In My Bag?" *Amoeba Music*. Accessed 20 August 2016. <<http://www.amoeba.com/whats-in-my-bag/#/grid/1>>
- Whitesell, Lloyd. 2006. "Trans Glam: Gender Magic in the Film Musical." *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Whiteley, Sheila and Jennifer Rycenga. New York and London: Routledge.

Williams, Colby D. 2011. "Reading 9/11 in 21st Century Apocalyptic Horror Films." Thesis, Georgia State University.

Williams, Kevin. 2003. *Why I (still) Want My MTV: Music Video and Aesthetic Communication*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.

Williamson, Milly. 2016. *Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wright, Alexa. 2013. *Monstrosity The Human Monster in Visual Culture*. London: I.B.Tauris.

Yarn House Live. "What is this?" Accessed 2 June 2018. <<http://yarnhouse.live/about/>>

YouTube Spotlight. "YouTube: Our Brand Mission," YouTube video, 1:48, June 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwmFPKQAX4g>.

zombiromance, "Leslie and the Ly's - Zombie Killer," YouTube Video, 3:06, August 16, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30V-92zSkJA>.

VITA

Kait LaPorte is a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Washington in Seattle. Her work focuses on the relationship between music and politics, including the music of social movements and expressions of queer and feminist politics through music. Throughout her graduate career, Kait has taught lectures on these topics in courses on American folk and popular music, for which she served as a teaching assistant. Kait's early musical training is in piano and voice, but the groundwork for this dissertation was truly laid by the times she secretly watched MTV while her parents weren't home and against their express wishes.