

## Queering Karaoke at Liverpool's The Lisbon Pub and Beyond

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My interest in karaoke studies began to develop in 2007 when I conducted my first ethnographic research as part of an MA course at Liverpool's Institute of Popular Music.<sup>1</sup> What drew me instantly to karaoke practice was its omnipresence across many city pubs and bars.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the awareness that issues of gender and sexuality had been addressed only casually in the available literature on karaoke (e.g. Drew 2001; Mitsui and Hosokawa eds. 1998) urged me to undertake a circumscribed kind of karaoke fieldwork that would elucidate and fill the detected gap in the field. Drawing upon Butler's (1999) proposition that it is through minority gendered and sexual practices that the performative nature of gender comes to the fore, I ended up at Liverpool's gay and lesbian pub The Lisbon observing karaoke nights on Thursdays and Sundays for six months.

In the present article, The Lisbon's karaoke events are thus conceptualized as producing a queer space within which traditional binaries in the realm of gender and sexuality (but also beyond) are called into question through karaoke performances. Such a conceptual approach is premised on Drew's conclusion reached in his ethnography on karaoke practice in the USA. According to him, "[k]araoke isn't just about validating personal and social identities; it's about performing and testing these identities before others" (2001, 121). In this article, I likewise focus on gendered and sexual aspects of identity in karaoke performers with the following question in mind: In what ways does karaoke practice contribute to the destabilization and denaturalization of gender and sexual categories specific to such queer contexts as Liverpool's The Lisbon pub? Of main interest here are thus queer articulations of gender and sexuality that The Lisbon's karaoke space

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<sup>1</sup> In academic literature, the term *karaoke* is employed to denote both "a machine that plays recorded music which people can sing to" and "the activity of singing using a karaoke machine" (Mitsui 1998, 40–41).

<sup>2</sup> As Kelly pointed out in his karaoke study in the UK, "the [karaoke] phenomenon was [indeed] first established in the industrial north of England [in the late 1980s] and it is here, in the midst of a general decline nationally, that it continues to thrive" (1998, 85). The corresponding view came up as well in the interview (February 2008) I conducted with The Lisbon pub's karaoke jockey Martin who moved his house from London to Liverpool for better job opportunities in the karaoke industry.

affords to its users. The ultimate aim of the article is, in Butler's terms, to rethink gender and its possible expressions by inquiring what is queer about karaoke practice at The Lisbon pub and beyond. The term *queer* clearly highlights a challenge that (The Lisbon's) karaoke practice may posit to restrictive and oppressive bodily and gender norms consolidated through the heteronormative gender order.

To accomplish this objective, I opt to keep my analytical focus close by looking into two regularly performed songs at The Lisbon and their queer appropriations in the pub's karaoke context. Underlying this analytical choice is another assumption made by Drew about *crowd favorites* at U.S. karaoke bars. In his view, such karaoke songs display a capacity "to crystallize the experience of the people who celebrate them and, as a result, to constitute these people as members of a common culture" (2001, 56). Accordingly, it is through the analysis of The Lisbon's two then-crowd favorites – Adele's "Chasing Pavements" and Amy Winehouse's "Valerie" – that I intend to grasp what constituted the pub's queer culture back in the time of my karaoke fieldwork. For the purpose of such analysis, I mainly employ the concepts of *queer camp* (see, for instance, Case 1988–89; Booth 1983; Dyer 1976; Newton 1972) and *opera queen* (see Brett and Wood 2006; Koestenbaum 1993; Morris 1993), both of which borrowed from the field of gay and lesbian cultural/music studies. The former concept provides the terminology with which to identify queer camp elements in several objects of my analysis – namely, in the public/private image of the two singers, in their respective singles "Chasing Pavements" and "Valerie", and in the idiosyncrasies of karaoke performances of these two songs at The Lisbon. The latter concept is additionally reworked to fit the objects and context of the present analysis, adjusting therefore to two genre-specific pop music texts and their reuses in The Lisbon's queer karaoke space.

More specifically, the Opera Queen, known also as *the diva effect*, can be defined as a subject position generally associated with "twentieth-century homosexual cultures in the West, including both lesbians and gay males" (Brett and Wood 2006, 369). Or in Morris's formulation, the Opera Queen refers to "that particular segment of the (...) (homosexual) community that defines itself by the extremity and particularity of its obsession with opera" (1993, 184). By analogy with opera queens, I argue that the fascination and identification of The Lisbon's karaoke singers (of any sex, gender, and sexual orientation) with Adele and Winehouse as pop-soul divas created for them the subject position of pop-soul queens. And as Davies and Harré clarify, the concept of *positioning* is central to the discursive production of the multiple "selves" or "identities" one assumes, be they "called forth" or actively constructed along the way. In their words,

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (1990, 46).

In like manner, for The Lisbon's pop-soul queens, it is arguably the queer perspective from which the world is viewed, narrated, experienced, and embodied.

The analysis of the pop-soul queen phenomenon at The Lisbon pub is conducted with two goals in mind. The first is to trace (by means of analogical relationship between opera queens and opera divas) the connections that The Lisbon's queer crowd was making in relation to two pop-soul divas, Adele and Amy Winehouse, in general, and to their two songs in particular. The key question here is thus: What is it about these two divas and their two respective songs that resonated so well with the experience of The Lisbon's queer crowd (and beyond)? The second objective of my analysis is to illustrate how these connections were played out in actual karaoke performances at The Lisbon.

Finally, I conclude my article with a theoretical discussion on the queer camp potential of karaoke practice extending beyond the situatedness of my ethnographic study. I develop my argument by proposing that karaoke practice on the whole can be thought of as constituting a Thirdspace (Soja 1996). And it is queer camp moments, so the argument goes, that provide this "third" mode of karaoke's spatial imagination. Arguably, they open up opportunities in everyday life contexts for moving beyond the "normative" forms of gender towards more fluid, inclusive, and non-violent projections of the gendered world.

The subsequent analysis clearly draws on eclectic material sources and the corresponding selection of theoretico-methodological approaches within a broadly defined cultural studies framework. What constitutes, though, their common ground and glues them together is the consistent use of a queer camp perspective. Subsumed under its scope is specifically the interpretation of the fieldwork material collected from The Lisbon between November 2007 and April 2008, as well as the relevant media online reports on Adele and Winehouse, but also a close reading of "Chasing Pavements" and "Valerie". It is also worth noting that my inquiry is largely (but not exclusively) informed by the groundbreaking work in queer musicology (e.g. Jarman-Ivens 2009; Hawkins 2009; 2006; Brett and Wood 2006; Richardson 2006; Whiteley and Rycenga eds. 2006; Koestenbaum 1993), as well as by a variety of theoretical concepts originating from a larger field of gender/feminist/queer studies (e.g. Halberstam 2005; Dyer 2004; Sullivan 2003; Rushbrook 2002; Butler 1999; Cleto 1999). Aligning itself to the basic tenets of postmodern, poststructural, and critical theory, the present article sets itself a similar task of problematizing the

notion of polarized essences that runs through much of commonsense thinking about gender and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> To attend to this task, I first briefly clarify the crucial terms operating within the conceptual and analytical framework outlined above.

### **The Essential Vocabulary of Queer Theory and Its Analytical Usage in the Article: *Gender Subversion, Camp, and Queer***

My exploration of gender and sexuality in The Lisbon's karaoke performances is grounded in Butler's (1999) oft-cited theory on the performative basis of gender identity. Importantly, I adopt a middle-of-the-road stance towards the "determinism versus agency" debate which this theory stirred in academia (see Sullivan 2003). This means that, following feminist writers such as LaFrance (2002, 10–12), I do acknowledge discursive mechanisms and historico-cultural contingencies behind the processes of gender identity construction, whilst allowing at the same time a possibility of individual agency in negotiating and subverting imposed/internalized gendered modalities. Another way to account for this dialectic is to use Butler's distinction between *gender performativity* and *performance*. Performativity "consists in a reiteration of [gender] norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer" (Butler 1993, 24), whereas performance is seen as "a set of actions which a presumably always already constituted subject intentionally and knowingly choreographs, in some cases for subversive means" (Sullivan 2003, 201).

The "performativity/performance" distinction is problematic on a number of accounts. First, it is open to debate where to draw the line between intentional and unintentional instances of gender performance. As Edensor (2002, 71–72), following Merleau-Ponty, notes on a more general level, human actions involve different modes of reflexivity (most of which are "practical" and engaged rather than contemplative) that switch from one to another according to one's familiarity with situations and activities undertaken. Second, it is likewise hard to differentiate between subversive and unsubversive gender forms, since what is considered gender subversion changes across time, space, and social group. Moreover, even in case the consensus on this is reached, there is additionally the question of what are exactly political effects of gender subversion. This question

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<sup>3</sup> It is a truism that much of queer studies nowadays calls for an intersectional analysis of identity, throwing additionally into relief the relationship of social identifiers other than gender and sex (such as race, ethnicity, age, etc.) to prevailing regimes of power/knowledge. Notwithstanding that, I still insist on keeping a narrow focus on issues of gender and sexuality in the present karaoke study, since such an approach secures the aspired depth of my analytical efforts. In so doing, I acknowledge that my analysis runs a risk of being accused either of exercising a tunnel vision on the subject matter, or of projecting "liberal, elitist, or Euro-centric" views in the eyes of minorities other than sexual (cf. Dayal cited in Amico 2006, 137).

becomes even more pertinent when considering that subversive gender acts are prone to clichéization and commodification in the cultural industry markets thriving on shock value. Besides, as Butler explains:

Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact (1999, xiv).

While acknowledging the relevance of all these critical arguments, I assert that the analytical focus on a particular kind of activity (karaoke) and context (The Lisbon pub) in this article reduces a majority of dilemmas and paradoxes addressed above. To be exact, if musical “performing is about (...) turning one’s identity into a theatricalized event”, as Hawkins (2009, 11) suggests in his study of the British pop dandy, then karaoke equally offers performers a possibility to arrange and manage the stylization of their bodily actions. Moreover, that karaoke, just like any other form of staged music performance, brings issues of gender and sexuality to the fore, is another viewpoint coming close to Hawkins’s theorization. According to him, it is in the arena of pop music that explorations of erotic desire and fantasy hold a central place, whereas genderplay works almost as a norm. Karaoke practice can likewise be understood as a common platform for a plenitude of (un)intentional gender enactments, and possibly transgressions, through playful displays and deployments of the gendered body and voice. When filtered in addition through the queer framework of The Lisbon’s karaoke space, such gender performances can be said to break down a presumably causal or structural link between gender and sexual practice, and thereby defy the heteronormative implications of such thinking. In doing so, karaoke activity at The Lisbon, as the following analysis will illustrate, ultimately disrupts and transcends the binary-based categories of gender and sexual identity (namely, strict binaries of masculine/feminine and straight/gay).

Of crucial importance here is also the use of *camp* as an effective stylistic strategy for disclosing the performative nature of gender. Camp is routinely associated with (self-)irony, (self-)parody, artificiality, theatricality, and exaggeration (see, for instance, Sullivan 2003, 193), producing thus “a disruptive style of humour that defies canons of taste” (Brett and Wood cited in Hawkins 2009, 146). However, the theorization of camp within a broad perspective of cultural studies has been by far more complex and exhaustive than the description given above. As Cleto notes, camp has initially been conceptualized “as *sensibility, taste, or style*, reconceptualised as *aesthetic* or *cultural economy*, and later asserted/reclaimed as (*queer*) *discourse*” (1999, 2; emphasis in original). It is

mainly in this last sense that I use the notion *camp* in the analysis of The Lisbon's karaoke phenomenon.

Moreover, this also explains why I use the terms *camp* and *queer* interchangeably or jointly (as in the expression *queer camp*) throughout the article. Implied by this is the main analytical concern with those aspects of camp performativity in karaoke practice which are framed as *queer performativity* (Sedgwick's expression cited in Cleto 1999, 32). This practically means that I seek to discern the ways in which camp is utilized in karaoke practice – first, to reveal the sociocultural contingency and constructedness of dominant gender and sexual modalities; and second, to disturb and counter the pervasive authority of heteronormativity. In this approach, queerness is as broadly defined as “a positionality vis-à-vis the [hetero]normative” (Halperin cited in Sullivan 2003, 43). Queer, thus, operates less as a sexual category that can be distinguished across a wide range of cultural texts and practices. Queer is rather understood as equivalent to a critical approach which renders the prevailing sexual and gender order problematic and inherently oppressive (cf. Lee Oakes 2006, 48).

Note in addition that the joint expression *queer camp* does not solely work here as an indicator of the camp's subversive political edge. Its consistent usage also points to two main discursive arenas within which “both [notions of] camp and queer (and camp as queer)” came to take shape over time. In the first, camp is to be reclaimed and preserved by LGBTQ cultures on the grounds of its initial homosexual meanings. And of relevance in the second discursive arena are instances of camp's diffusion into the channels of mainstream (“straight”) mass-consumption due to its appeal to the “postmodern subject” (Cleto 1999, 33–34). Thus, by introducing the term *queer camp* into the analysis of karaoke practice in The Lisbon's queer space, I wish to call attention to the camp's original affiliation with both past and present-day queer cultural practices. Then again, since mainstream and queer cultures stand in dialectical relationship with each other, both discursive layers of camp and queer are in fact implicitly entangled in the discussion of karaoke that follows.

### **Liverpool's The Lisbon Pub as a Queer Space**

The Lisbon pub is located on the corner of Stanley and Victoria Streets at the very heart of Liverpool's Gay Quarter. It occupies a spacious underground area designed in the flamboyant pub style of the late Victorian era. What immediately catches the customer's eye are, indeed, The Lisbon's lavishly ornate red-golden ceiling and dark wooden panels covering the walls along with decorative mirrors, wall sconces, and framed posters and prints of the eclectic content. The pub's

interior space is encircled, along the wall lines, by padded benches complete with tables and chairs, a massive bar, a pool table, a couple of fruit machines, as well as a tiny dance floor with a DJ most nights and a KJ (karaoke jockey) on Thursdays and Sundays.

The history of The Lisbon as a public venue is long and rich, stretching back to the 1930s when it operated as a “fully licensed first-class restaurant” serving then-exotic dishes, such as, frog legs and Burgundy snails (Tankard 1932). The conversion of the venue into a gay pub took place in the late 1970s (Dr. Michael Brocken, pers. comm.). Nowadays The Lisbon is categorized, marketed, narrated, and experienced as a “mixed gay/lesbian” and “straight friendly” venue. While the necessity of such categorizations for legal, commercial, organizational, cultural, and other reasons is understanding and well-expected, many instances of gender and sexual ambiguities on the ground bear witness to the limiting scope of the simplified sex labels such as “gay”, “lesbian”, and “straight”. For this reason, I put forward the more inclusive and binary-breaking term *queer* to describe The Lisbon’s crowd (and hence The Lisbon’s space accommodating that crowd), since it depicts more accurately the ambiguous relationship of people’s sexual inclinations and gender modalities displayed and performed therein.

What constitutes The Lisbon in addition as a queer space is the incongruity produced between the pub’s outer “straightness” (i.e. its traditional-looking, late Victorian exterior and interior design) and its inner “queerness” (i.e. the above-pinpointed diversity of its crowd along gender and sexual lines).

Indeed, a great majority of my interlocutors from The Lisbon agreed about the community feel and warm qualities that the pub holds, and yet did not hesitate to point to other gay venues in Liverpool (such as, The Masquerade Bar, G-Bar, or Chicago’s) which they considered more representative of the local queer culture. Moreover, one of my informants spoke unfavorably about the venue, most notably about its interior decoration, describing it as “too straight” and thus boring. “I dropped in to please my boyfriend”, he excused his presence at the pub.

Public reviews of The Lisbon acknowledge likewise the pub’s apparent falling short of the usual visual expectations for gay venues. As The Lisbon’s online reviewer Emma Louise M. (2010) writes, “when we think Gay Quarter, we think neon, thumping music, bright colours and highly modern”. Then again, as she asserts further, it is precisely The Lisbon’s external “straightness” that assists the pub’s enduring popularity with the queer crowd.

For the very same reason, some public reviews of The Lisbon showcase the initial puzzlement of its newcomers at whether the venue belongs at all to the Liverpool’s Gay Quarter. But once the initial doubt is cast away, the novices are overtaken by a sense of relief and gratification, as the following online comment attests:

The Rainbow flag around the (pub's) side and the fun music pulled us in. We were a bit confused about whether the flag actually belonged to what looked like a straight, dingy, old basement pub. There didn't seem to be a flag over the door, so we just went in and hoped for the best. Once we were in, we realised that - hoorah - it was, in fact, a gay pub (sparklepop in *View Liverpool* 2010).

More to the point, by calling The Lisbon a queer space, I automatically assign queerness a function of the focal filter through which to observe and interpret all cultural activities (not least karaoke performances) unfolding therein. Put in the language of Goffman's theory of framing, the queerness of The Lisbon's space can also be said to "determin(e) the type of 'sense' that will be accorded to everything within the frame" (1961, 20). Following this line of reasoning, I assert that whoever enters The Lisbon enters a queer space; whatever happens at The Lisbon acquires a queer flavor; and by extension, whoever finds themselves at The Lisbon can be said to partake in the production of its queer space.

## Queering The Lisbon's Crowd Favorites

### *The Cult of the Singer: Adele and Amy Winehouse as Pop-Soul Divas*

In this section of the article I chart a list of factors giving rise to the cult of Adele and Amy Winehouse as pop-soul divas. The main task here is, thus, to single out those elements in Adele and Winehouse's overall public output that appealed, and continue to appeal, to The Lisbon's queer crowd (and beyond).

To begin with, I maintain that Adele and Amy Winehouse were publicly conferred the status of "gay icons" as a result of *the diva effect* to which both artists succumbed. Their affiliation with queer culture does not take the form of explicit engagement, especially considering the heteronormative orientation in both artists' music production and image construction off and on stage.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it is more instructive to slot them into the category of what Booth calls *camp fads and fancies*. In his words, this category comprises "people and objects, which, although not intrinsically camp, appeal to camp people" (1983, 68). I argue accordingly that it is precisely through Adele and Winehouse's cult of pop-soul singers/divas that these two artists are so successful in recruiting their queer followers, The Lisbon's crowd included.

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<sup>4</sup> The only exception to this was Amy Winehouse's self-outing as bisexual in 2010 (see Towle 2010).

First, it should not go unnoticed that *the cult of the singer*, which is in Morris's (1993, 187) view "central to the 'true' opera queen's aesthetic", is a role specifically assigned to females. In that regard, the veneration of Adele and Winehouse by The Lisbon's crowd clearly followed in the footsteps of a larger queer tradition, which can generally be described as female-identified. In the queer studies literature, the driving force behind this type of worship is theorized in several different ways. For Koestenbaum (1993), the elements of diva conduct are said to be reworked by gay men/queers as part of their charting a way through the hostile homophobic environment. For Dyer, gay men/queers identify with female singers/divas because of their shared desire for men (2004, 151), but also because they reject "most of the values associated with masculinity in this society (aggressiveness, competitiveness, being 'above' tenderness and emotion)" (1999, 112).

At any rate, all this might also explain the observations of Drew (2001) and The Lisbon's KJ Martin on the role of sex and gender in the selection process of karaoke songs. Drawing on their respective (field)work experience, they both noticed that male performers in straight karaoke bars rarely do female vocals, and when doing so, they, to quote Drew, tend to "use overstatement and horseplay to slyly intimate, "This isn't really me" (2001, 65). A male share of The Lisbon's crowd, in contrast, readily performed "ladies songs" (how KJ Martin calls them), delivering them with genuine conviction and passion. I would say that such observations seem to ring true despite the essentialist undertones underpinning them.

Second, Adele and Winehouse's appeal to The Lisbon's queer crowd lies substantially in the style of music they are associated with. The labels *blue-eyed retro soul* (Brooks 2010, 39) and *the vintage-soul* perhaps describe most accurately the musical style which was in the 2000s ardently endorsed and fostered not only by Adele and Winehouse but also by "other young white Brit females who pass [as well] for black American lady singers from the sixties" (Reynolds 2011, xix). It is, arguably, this wholehearted commitment to retro styles in much of Adele and Winehouse's visual presentation and sonic output that is most pertinent to queer tastes. According to Reynolds, retro and camp are usually linked out of playfulness and irony with which contemporary artists recycle and recombine various stylistic codes from the past to create their own "bricolage of cultural bric-a-brac" (2011, xxxi-xxxii). However, this is not really the case with Adele and Winehouse and their dead serious retro-fetishistic approach to music production. Rather, what draws queers to Adele and Winehouse's pop-soul songs is the nostalgic sentiment evoked by their lyrical content and vintage sound. Following Anderson, Padvá sees "nostalgia (...) [as] a form of desire which creates a complex *temporality* for queer subjects for whom the past offers neither explanation nor origin" (2014, Chapter 1, para. 15; emphasis in original). And this is precisely where the link between queer nostalgia and queer retro inclinations is to be made. Psychoanalytically speaking, retro tastes

in queers have a compensatory function for the elusive origins of their sexuality: “Because queers do not usually have queer parents, queers must invent precedent and origin for their taste” (Koestenbaum 1993, 47). Hence a great love of queers for bygone styles.

Indeed, in the visual domain, the success of Winehouse’s look, especially her conspicuous beehive hairdo and Cleopatra makeup, rested largely upon the distinct style of the 1960s girl groups, above all, the Ronettes (see Yaeger 2007). Adele’s visual appearance likewise continues to thrive on retro chic and glamour of the same era. Besides her 1960s inspired makeup (in particular her kitten eyeliner) and hairdos (ranging from bouffant and similar updo types of hairstyles to voluminous curls), Adele also takes pride in her love for vintage clothes, or in her “wor[k] with her stylist to create one-of-a-kind dresses for big events” (Nespolo 2014). This parallels the opera diva’s obsession with gowns, as discussed in Koestenbaum’s analysis of the codes of diva conduct. As he notes, “[a] good gown vindicates the diva by making her glamorous, and it inspires the queer fan by showing gender’s dependence on costume” (1993, 120).

Music-wise, Winehouse and Adele’s soul/torch songs are well tailored to showcase the singer’s vocal mastery. This is another significant quality that resembles the opera queen’s fascination with the excessiveness and artificiality of operatic singing styles (see Hendrickson 2006). Furthermore, songs by these two artists abound, just like opera does, in dramatized, overemotional expression, “provid[ing] a situation where most of (...) rigidly controlled desires and attitudes [in queer subjects] may have free rein without social censure” (Morris 1993, 193). Such songs can also be seen to both channel and compensate for a sense of failure at love that every queer person is doomed to encounter by refusing to partake in the heteronormative sexual, marital, and reproductive economies (cf. Koestenbaum 1993).

In addition, the brassy quality of Adele and Winehouse’s vocal timbre and the gritty soulfulness of their vocal delivery in a clearly Americanized accent (which is otherwise British) construct their vocal subjectivities as unmistakably “black”. In this regard, there is once again a noteworthy analogy to be made with white opera divas and some troubling instances of racial masquerade in their vocal performance practice. For one thing, opera divas are taught to aspire to a certain quality of sound, which they can achieve by making it “darker” (i.e. by covering the tones). Secondly, they are routinely associated with the images of darkness through the roles of dark-skinned, willful heroines they play, “underscoring at the same time, in a problematic masquerade, the[ir] (...) separation from the women of color (...) [they] portray” (Koestenbaum 1993, 106). By analogy, Adele and Winehouse have their musical (and otherwise) identities authenticated by “putting on the ‘vocal costume’” (Frith cited in Hawkins 2009, 123) of black female performers. Also, they can musically appropriate and explore “the trope of ‘blackness’ as a site of affective nostalgia” (cf.

Brooks 2010, 50) but without bearing the burden of race. And last but not least, the gap between their visual “whiteness” and sonic “blackness” is filled with sensational narratives about both divas’ personal affairs and emotional troubles. The white/black split therefore neither incites critical interrogations on the workings of white privilege in interracial musical encounters, nor it instigates reflections on the racial complexity of the retro soul past (cf. Brooks 2010). But even if problematic, it is perhaps this obvious crossing of the white/black binary in the construction of Adele and Winehouse’s respective stage persona, that resonates well with the queer public.

Besides retro-fetishism, nostalgia, vocal mastery and racial masquerade displayed in their work, there are several other factors consolidating Adele and Winehouse’s status as pop-soul divas. For instance, both singers exemplify what Flinn (1999, 448) calls *camp’s exaggeration of the female form*. In the case of Adele, this is to some extent implicated in the discourse of obesity, as her zaftig figure repeatedly comes up as a topic in the media limelight.<sup>5</sup> Not only are larger bodies in (opera) diva iconography presumed to signify the diva’s “presence” and the superiority of her vocal capacity. There is also a sense of allegiance between large divas and queer subjects based on the shared understanding of the body as a site of shame and difference (Koestenbaum 1993, 101). Speaking on behalf of opera queens, Koestenbaum offers an additional explanation for the fascination of queers with large divas:

We consider the diva fat because *we* are the hungry ones; we want to ingest the diva through our voracious, vulnerable ears. And so we project onto the diva’s body an image of our own cannibalistic orality, an image of how grotesque we consider our desires to be (102).

The exaggerated female form can also be a result of “what that body might undergo, be it substance abuse” (Flinn 1999, 448) or (self-)destructive behavior. This was chiefly linked to the public image of Amy Winehouse (much less to that of Adele<sup>6</sup>), whose notorious history of drug and alcohol addiction, coupled with a number of other mental health problems (such as, depression, self-harm, aggression, eating disorders), was painstakingly documented in media reports.

Furthermore, if “camp also works to violate the standards of ‘good taste’, allying itself with filth, the profane, and an overall sense of disreputability” (Flinn 1999, 447), then Winehouse’s reputation as “a filthy-mouthed, down-to-earth diva” (Rogers 2006) and one of the worst dressed female

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<sup>5</sup> Adele admitted in an interview that “she is a little resistant with the negative aspects of fame especially when it comes to gossip and criticisms about her weight. ‘I’ve always been a size 14–16, and been fine with it’, Adele said to *The Times*. ‘I would only lose weight if it affected my health or sex life’” (see Morrison 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Namely, Adele’s autobiographer, Marc Shapiro, shed light on the circumstances under which the singer would have episodes of binge drinking (see *The Huffington Post* 2012).

celebrities (see *Bold Sky* 2009) provides an excellent case in point. Such an impression was additionally reinforced by the trashy aesthetic of her 13 tattoos, many of which “markings reminiscent of cheap flash: hearts, anchors, pin-ups, horseshoes, a pocket above her left breast lettered with her lover’s name” (Trebay 2011).

What adds to the construction of Adele and Winehouse as pop-soul divas is a touch of tragedy, as evidenced by Winehouse’s horrible death at her premature age and the heyday of her music career. Parallels with opera divas can once again be drawn here, in particular with Maria Callas, whose cult status among opera queens has been assisted by her untimely death, too. In Koestenbaum’s view, queers can easily relate to the diva’s tragic end because their experience is similarly marked by the themes of “premature mortality, evanescence, solitude” (1993, 134).

The tragic undertones also underpinned much of the media chronicle of Adele’s troubles with her vocal chords, which led to a temporary loss of her voice and, eventually, to a throat surgery. As a result, Adele’s voice changed in a way she describes as “‘not as husky’ and (...) higher than it used to be” (Cable 2013). This sets Adele in line with a considerable number of opera divas whose careers have also been interrupted or brought to an end by vocal crisis. The notion of *vocal crisis* is very relevant to queer experience, as documented by Koestenbaum:

“Vocal crisis” means *a crisis in the voice*, but it also means *articulate crisis, crisis given voice*. Hardly an interruption of diva art, vocal crisis is the diva’s self-lacerating announcement that interruption has been, all along, her subject and method. And in her interruption, I hear the imagined nature of homosexuality as a rip in meaning, in coherence, in cultural systems, in vocal consistency. Homosexuality isn’t intrinsically an interruption; but society has characterized it as a break and a schism, and gay people, who are molded in the image of crisis and emergency, (...) may begin to identify with crisis and to hear the interrupted voice as [their] echo (1993, 128–129; emphasis in original).

In short, it is the controversial elements of Adele’s and Winehouse’s broken lives that turn them into objects of queer obsession. Moreover, according to Mira, ‘the key to defining the diva [as opposed to the star] is the way in which she inhabits her own myth, the way in which her life oozes through her creations’ (cited in Knights 2006, 88). It is likewise difficult to differentiate between the personas that Adele and Winehouse assume on stage (in their music) and off stage (in their personal affairs). The locus of queer investments works accordingly on multiple fronts at the same time. For instance, the possibility for queer identifications might arise out of intimate engagement with tabloid details of Adele and Winehouse’s emotional struggles in both their private and

professional lives. Then again, queer subjectivity is also produced through appropriations of certain elements of Adele's and Winehouse's embodied images (their body type, visual style, and singing voice) and respective song repertoire (both their lyrical content and musical style).

Along the process, of special relevance to queer subjects is the capacity of both artists to convey a sense of vulnerability and suffering combined with defiance (both actual and depicted in music) (cf. Brett and Wood 2006, 369). In view of that, the comments on a Winehouse's queer tribute forum (2007) praising "Amy's raw emotional delivery, rebellious nature, explicit lyrics and appearance", or "a mixture of courage and vulnerability" in the totality of her being-in-the-world, come as no surprise. Adele's strength-through-vulnerability strategy employed in her torch songs of loss and longing seems to produce similar effects on her queer devotees. Namely, her songs are described in the media as having power to help young gay men come-out (see Towle 2011), even to turn people gay (see Morgan 2014).

Except for their publicly recognized emotional authenticity, Adele and Winehouse are apparently also appreciated by queer audiences for daring to challenge the norm, to be different, and at the same time for receiving worldwide acclaim despite (or because of?) that difference. However, the violation of cultural norms by divas becomes a proof of supremacy and a source of empowerment precisely because it is predicated upon their public recognition, and because for non-divas, as Koestenbaum points out, 'difference only leads to ridicule' (1993, 91).

In queer-related public discourses, both Adele and Winehouse are, indeed, described as pop divas breaking "out of the mold". Adele is praised for her "anti-Gaga" allure, "easy accessibility", and therefore "an image as a living, breathing human being" (Williams 2011). Winehouse is likewise discussed on her tribute forum (2007) as sporting "a style of her own" which is at odds with the media-dominant image of Barbie or bimbo female types. She is additionally seen as "a woman with balls", or as someone displaying tomboy or "drag-queenish" qualities and attendant sexual ambiguities.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, for pop-soul queens at The Lisbon and beyond, the difference that Adele and Winehouse are said to embody apparently inspires their never-ending struggle to be accepted on equal terms as the heteronormative majority.

To reiterate, then, the previous analysis sought to pinpoint the elements that constitute Adele's and Winehouse's statuses as pop-soul divas. Also illustrated was how these elements might (have) be(en) pertinent to the everyday experience of pop-soul queens from The Lisbon and elsewhere. In

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<sup>7</sup> A forum member with the alias "black" wrote: "I can't remember where I saw her say these things but in one interview she says 'I'm more of a boy than a girl but that doesn't mean I'm a lesbian, at least not until I've had a sambouka [sic]'. On another post she's asked who's your favorite female artist? and she says Alice Cooper, I love her. Then she's asked are you a sex symbol? and she says only to gays."

the next section, the analytical focus switches to more specific considerations of queer details in The Lisbon's two crowd favorites (one by Adele and the other by Winehouse) and their respective karaoke renderings.

### *Queer Analysis of The Lisbon's Crowd Favorites*

In the following queer analysis of The Lisbon's crowd favorites, Adele's "Chasing Pavements" and Winehouse's "Valerie", and their karaoke performances, I proceed from two theoretical assumptions.

Firstly, I expand on the implications of Koestenbaum's (1993, 42) observation that the opera queen's identification with divas emerges through the acts of listening and singing along. Specifically, he argues that it is through engagement with the diva's singing that queer subjects can restore their queer embodiment which is otherwise curbed by straight socialization. Or as Koestenbaum puts it in a more elaborate fashion:

You listen to an operatic voice or you sing with operatic tone production and thereby your throat participates in that larger, historical throat, the Ur-throat, the queen's throat, the throat-in-the-sky, the throat-in-the-mind, the voice box beneath the voice box. Homosexuality is a way of singing. I can't *be* gay, I can only *sing* it, disperse it. I can't knock on its door and demand entrance because it is not a place or a fixed location. Instead, it is a million intersections – or it is a dividing line, a membrane, like the throat, that separates the body's breathing interior from the chaotic external world (1993, 156; emphasis in original).

I assert, by extension, that The Lisbon's pop-soul queens' investments in the diva figures of Adele and Winehouse are even stronger in their emotional, experiential, and corporeal ramifications when made through the karaoke medium. This is because in karaoke renderings of "Chasing Pavements" and "Valerie", the diva's voice actually speaks, as it were, through the throat of The Lisbon's pop-soul queens. The distance which otherwise separates pop-soul queens from their beloved divas is not only reduced along the way. It is also suspended, so to speak, allowing karaoke performers to reinvent themselves into actual reincarnations of the diva herself.

Secondly, and on a related note, drawing on Devitt's (2006) and Lee Oakes's (2006) queer readings of particular music events and performances, I propose in addition an approach to karaoke as performance in drag. According to Newton, central to the concept of drag is "*distance* [posited] between the actor and the role or 'act'" (1999, 105; emphasis in original). Paradoxically,

thus, to erase the distance between themselves and their beloved divas, pop-soul queens actually need to foreground it in their karaoke acts. In The Lisbon's queer space, to karaoke sing in drag is to masquerade as Adele's and Winehouse's voices; to revel "in detailed drag of queenliness" (Koestenbaum 1993, 108) by impersonating Adele's and Winehouse's diva conduct; to take an ambiguous stance by combining sincerity with camp's humor. All these forms of diva masquerade in The Lisbon's karaoke practice ultimately result in gender subversion. In this regard, The Lisbon's karaoke performances in drag come close to queer effects produced by the drag performance itself. The culturally constructed nature of gender performativity in drag performance has been famously addressed and elaborated by Butler. In her words,

When [gender and sex] categories come into question [in drag performance], the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be 'real', what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. (1999, xxiii; emphasis in original)

Furthermore, if "diva conduct, enacted by men or women, [...] has enormous power to dramatize the problematics of self-expression" (Koestenbaum 1993, 133), then its dramatic and expressive potential can presumably be explored and utilized to its fullest through karaoke performances of the diva's song repertoire. Both Drew's (2001) and my own ethnographic investigation in fact revealed that karaoke is often viewed as a vital source for self-expression and/or self-invention by its users. And since "gay culture has perfected the art of mimicking a diva – of pretending, inside, to *be* divine – to help the stigmatized self imagine it is received, believed, and adored" (Koestenbaum 1993, 133; emphasis in original), then retaliatory opportunities for self-expression/self-invention that karaoke affords to queer subjects must also be acknowledged.

Lastly, in order to proceed with the queer analysis of The Lisbon's crowd favorites, it is necessary to make some additional clarifications with respect to the methodological steps to be undertaken therein. Of central importance to the subsequent analysis are specifically Morris's findings about the opera queen's aesthetic stance, whereby "the intensity of discrete moments [in opera] matters more than large-scale dramatic coherence" (1993, 197). In accordance with this presumption, I offer first a close queer reading of "Chasing Pavements" and "Valerie" in turn. On these grounds, I investigate next how the key details of these two songs (in both their text and vocal delivery) work within the queer context of actual karaoke performances. While so doing, I pay a

special analytical attention to three recurring features pertinent to queer camp manifestations. According to Newton (1999), these are incongruity, theatricality, and humor.

*Adele "Chasing Pavements": A Queer Reading*

In the subsequent close analysis, I argue that Adele's "Chasing Pavements" was celebrated by The Lisbon's queer crowd because of the queer moments displayed in the song's lyrical content, and even more so in many of its musical properties.<sup>8</sup>

First of all, the very title of the song brought about some controversies in the American public because it was mistakenly understood to refer to the singer's chasing gay men (*Daily Mail* 2008). Perhaps the demonstrated public anxiety, which urged several U.S. radio stations to even ban the single from going on air, was generated in addition by the song's lyrical narrative within which the sex of the addressed object of desire is left unspecified. The latter is accomplished by the use of direct mode of address (i.e. the sex-neutral pronoun "you") every time the female protagonist of the song turns her attention to the person she desires and fears to confront with her love feelings.

Secondly, in terms of its lyrical content, the song clearly gives voice to people finding themselves in a position of vulnerability. This explains why the song can have a special appeal to sexual minorities living in a society which is at worst hostile and at best skeptical towards sexual (and otherwise) difference. Also, the opening verse of the song ("I've made up my mind, don't need to think it over. If I'm wrong I am right, don't need to look no further. This ain't lust, I know this is love.") might be said to interpellate listeners into the queer subject position by inviting them to embrace their non-normative sexual desires and accept them as something "right" even if they may come across as something "wrong" (i.e. stigma-laden). The next verse of the song calls to (queer) mind the idea of outing ("But if I tell the world"), immediately followed by the expressed sense of resignation ("I'll never say enough") that the disclosed queer desire would ever be understood and let alone accepted by heteronormative society. Despite all that, what only matters, as suggested by the lyrics in the rest of the verse ("'cause it was not said to you, and that's exactly what I need to do if I end up with you"), is the feeling of fulfillment promised to those (queers) who bravely pursue romantic love. Then again, the chorus of the song ("Should I give up? Or should I just keep chasing pavements even if it leads nowhere? Or would it be a waste even if I knew my place? Should I leave it there?") depicts the deadlock situation for stigmatized and guilt-burdened queer subjects torn

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<sup>8</sup> "Chasing Pavements" is a Grammy awarded torch song from Adele's debut album *19*, released in January 2008 by XL and Columbia Records.

between request to meet the expectations of heteronormative society (by “giving up” their romantic fantasies) and urgency to pursue their erotic desires (by “keeping chasing pavements”).

Importantly, it is in the musical fabric of the song that instances of gender and sexual ambiguities are even more revealing. To begin with, “Chasing Pavements” falls in line with the rest of Adele’s musical production subsumed under the heading of torch songs – a generic label featuring soul, R&B, jazz, and pop inflections. As explicated above, this fact alone is noteworthy from a queer point of view, since the given qualities of the song (such as high standards of vocal delivery, dramatized expression, and overriding sentiment of longing) can be easily reworked for queer uses. Besides, if we allow that “queerness, with its basis in highly mediated and mutable identities, can itself be marked as a feminine subject position”, as Lee Oakes (2006, 49) suggests, then torch songs, with their feminine associations, might hold a special resonance for queer audiences.

What is perhaps especially meaningful for the queer experience of “Chasing Pavements” (and other torch songs in general) are the moments in which the song protagonist’s emotional outburst persistently dwell on the verge of excess and corniness. This is especially evident in the chorus sections as well as at the culmination point towards the end of the song (namely, in the last segment of the bridge preceding the last rendition of the chorus). In both instances, over-the-top feelings and a sense of dramatic tension are conveyed by the sonic richness of instrumental arrangements, which stand in sharp contrast to the neighboring sections with more scarce textures (comprising the piano, guitar, bass, and drum kit in several different combinations). Specifically, the chorus section is performed with a full orchestral sound bringing structural and emotional climaxes, whereas the culmination point develops over tremolo strings, whose dramaturgic effect has been widely exploited throughout history across a variety of music genres.

Another point at which queer camp operates in these two sections of the song is the high register of the vocal part that centers on the persistently repeated note **B♭**. The camp effect of such repetition occurs to its fullest extent when the note **B♭** lends itself on the on-beats of the vocal line:

Example 1: The chorus opening

The musical score for the chorus opening of "Chasing Pavements" is shown in Example 1. It features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. The vocal line starts with a circled B-flat note on the first beat of the first measure. The lyrics are: "Should I give up? Or should I just keep chas-ing pave ments e-ven if it leads no-where?". The piano accompaniment consists of chords: A-flat major 9, G minor 7, C minor 7, F minor 11, A-flat major 7, A-flat major 13, and G minor 7.

## Example 2: The culmination point

Or should I just keep on chas-ing\_ pave-ments? Should I just

Being accentuated on the strongest and next strongest beats, the key note **B♭** in the examples above showcases to a degree what Jarman-Ivens calls “the exaggerated sense of [...] ‘phallic directionality’” within the structurally masculine narrative (2009, 200). As she clarifies further in her analysis of musical camp elements in one particular Liberace’s piano performance, “the exaggeration enacts a sense performativity in relation to that phallic masculinity, and (...) such playfulness with gendered codes is precisely at the heart of camp”.

I wish to add, however, that some crucial structural elements in “Chasing Pavements” can be coded as queer precisely because they work against the masculinity of the song’s overall compositional framework. Namely, the musical flow of the entire song can be said to progress in a sort of circulatory movement which remains without final closure. This logic of structural open-endedness and fluidity is buttressed, on the one hand, by the persistent incongruity, especially in the song verses, between the endings of lyrical lines and their corresponding melodic phrases in the vocal part. Produced as a result is the effect of disruption, leaving the listener with an impression of constantly shifting accents and attendant structural irregularities. On the other hand, what arguably “queers” the song’s structure are also its lingering tonal and harmonic ambiguities. Not only does the musical flow constantly vacillate between **C** minor (in its both natural and harmonic versions), as a key in which the song is crafted, and its relative **E♭** major, but it also refuses to settle on the tonic chord at the structural endings of the song. The only exception to this is a sense of closure accomplished at each (but one) conclusion of the chorus section. Even there, however, the ending is “weak” and sealed with the tonic chord of the relative **E♭** major.

Finally, there is one more crucial detail in “Chasing Pavements” that should be pointed out as the possibly queerest moment of the entire song. It emerges at the very borderline between the song’s first and second verses, falling on the word “but” (see below Example 3). What renders this occurrence queer is the intensity with which it destabilizes the surrounding musical flow, calling attention at the same time to the dubious meaning of the word “but”. The latter, indeed, needs to be acknowledged since the use of “but” captures succinctly the condition of queerness as being fraught with uncertainty and doubt. The musical means by which this “but-as-queer” moment comes across as an instance of sonic rupture, or perhaps as a symbolic cry of despair, are manifold. On the one hand, it is accentuated by its position on the (strongest) downbeat, by its relatively significant duration in the note value of the given time signature (i.e. the quarter note), and by its highest pitch within the song’s verse sections. On the other hand, the destabilizing (and therefore queer) impact of the “but” moment on the song’s surrounding structure is achieved through a temporarily changed time signature (from 4/4 into 2/4), through a harmonically induced tension and instability of the passing dominant chord belonging to both C minor and E♭ major, and through the above mentioned incongruity produced between corresponding musical and lyrical lines in terms of their different endings/beginnings (here the musical ending of the opening verse marks at the same time the beginning of the lyrical line of the next verse).

Example 3: The “but-as-queer” and “portamento” moments

The musical score for Example 3 shows the transition between the first and second verses of "Chasing Pavements". The first verse ends with the lyrics "I know this is love." and the second verse begins with "2. But". The chord progression is A♭maj7, B♭6, B♭7, E♭, Cm7, and Gm7. The "but-as-queer" moment is highlighted with a red circle around the B♭7 and E♭ chords, and the "portamento" moment is highlighted with a yellow circle around the Gm7 chord.

Of relevance here is also the musical phrase “this is love”, paving the way for the occurrence of the “but-as-queer” moment. The phrase offers a temporary resolution in E♭ major, whose bright undertone is meant to corroborate a sense of hope that the song’s protagonist expresses for the

future of her fantasized romance (by stating “this is love”). What makes this phrase sound campish is the cabaret-like style of Adele’s vocal delivery of the word “this”. Specifically, the singer’s voice makes a portamento move downward from the previously reached height of the note pitch **G** into that of **B $\flat$** , bridging that way the leap (of a major sixth) contained in the melodic line of the vocal part. The described portamento gesture and its theatrical (i.e. camp) effect are additionally underlined by a sense of attained equilibrium and by a seemingly prolonged duration of the phrase, both of which are thrown into sharp relief against the musical momentum of the next verse. If this, however, does not indicate a representative instance of “an overworked system of tension and release” as central to the production of musical camp, to refer to Jarman-Ivens (2009, 202) once again, then it bears at least traces of such workings.

Thus, as shown above, many properties of the song, such as, circularity, fluidity, open-endedness, a sense of irregularity, ambivalence, and disruption, call into question its structurally masculine narrative. Alongside these are occurrences of camp exaggeration in some segments of the vocal line and delivery underlined by the pathos of the orchestral tutti. Ultimately, all such elements work together in “Chasing Pavements” to undermine and “fool around” with the binary organization of gendered codes and procedures operating in music. They accordingly make an imprint in the listener’s experience which can be called queer insofar as it can be said to signify a non-normative position and a sense of troubled gender and sexual identity shared by Adele’s queer audience.

It goes without saying that a majority of The Lisbon’s karaoke pop-soul queens sought to adopt and replicate Adele’s singing style, for example, her portamento delivery of the song’s “this is love” part. But more importantly, as I am about to argue, it was through the idiosyncrasies of their vocal timbres, vocal deliveries, and stage performance styles that The Lisbon’s karaoke performers put an additional touch of camp’s queerness into their favorite song.

#### *Adele “Chasing Pavements”: The Lisbon’s Karaoke Performances*

In order to handle and systematize a great diversity of my fieldwork material, I divide the following queer analysis of The Lisbon’s karaoke performances of “Chasing Pavements” into two parts. The first centers on the exploration of incongruous juxtapositions along the masculine/feminine binary as a typical expression of camp, according to Newton (1999, 103). In The Lisbon’s queer karaoke space, the incongruity of such juxtapositions reveals itself in particular details of some karaoke singers’ vocal delivery as well as in their bodily impersonation of diva conduct. In the second part, attention shifts to the task of addressing and describing several types of

what Hawkins (2009) calls *camp vocalities* that surfaced in karaoke renditions of Adele's "Chasing Pavements".

To better understand how the incongruity between masculine and feminine played out in some vocal performances of The Lisbon's crowd favorite, it is important to recollect first that the subject position of pop-soul queens is female-identified. This fact alone bears camp implications, as Booth asserts in his article on the origins and definitions of camp:

*To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with the commitment greater than the marginal merits. (...) The primary type of the marginal in society is the traditionally feminine, which camp parodies in an exhibition of stylized effeminacy. (...) [This] throw[s] an ironic light not only on the abstract concept of the sexual stereotype, but also on the parodist him or herself (1999, 69; emphasis in original).*

Curiously enough, an absolute majority of The Lisbon's karaoke performances of "Chasing Pavements" seemed to exhibit no traces of parodic intentions. On the contrary, they were meant to be taken seriously, thereby encroaching on the terrain of so-called *unintentional (or naïve) camp* (Newton 1999), the acknowledgment of which is predicated upon the (queer) viewer's perception. That said, The Lisbon's karaoke events did provide pop-soul queens with a platform from which to display and indulge in gestures of "stylized effeminacy" while performing "Chasing Pavements".

This was especially true for The Lisbon's karaoke-goer Ralph, a blonde short-haired and scarce-bearded Liverpudlian in his early twenties. His performance of "Chasing Pavements" was grounded in an elaborate enactment of diva conduct. The moment his singing commenced, his whole-body figure suddenly "shrank", taking up a constricted posture – a gesture suggesting a strong concentration on singing. Such an abrupt switch to the role of diva performance was simultaneously accompanied by the recurring delicate shrugs of his shoulders, lifted in sync with the beat of the sung phrases. Soon his body began to relax and move gently, mainly from one side to the other, sometimes with the upper part making a full circulatory movement, sometimes with a sudden pull of his head to either side. The intensity of his bodily movements was naturally dictated by those of the sung phrases. Even if subtle on the whole, his karaoke performance came across as stage-conscious containing an apparently high level of bodily self-regulation. This was especially discernible in a number of Ralph's hand movements and facial expressions as the major loci of emotional investment involved in his role-playing. Indeed, the hallmark of Ralph's karaoke renderings of "Chasing Pavements" was a wide-open palm or a limp wrist of his free hand (the other was busy holding the mike) gesturing in the air or resting briefly over his chest (as a symbolic

gesture of emotional suffering) for the most part of his performance. No less contributing to Ralph's emphatic role-playing act were as well the grimaces of pain and sorrow complementing his singing, particularly at the climax points of the song. In short, by assuming the diva stance in his karaoke renditions of "Chasing Pavements", Ralph could freely enjoy and celebrate the stylized gestures of his queer embodiment as an unfettered site of transgressive gender play.

Moreover, one common trait found in almost all karaoke performances of "Chasing Pavements" at The Lisbon was an oft-present tendency towards grimacing so as to express a yearning sentiment of the song. The facial expressions of emotional suffering form part of the canned and limited corpus of gestural mannerism long-established in the history of vocal practice, and as such, they can be easily imitated. Yet, if exaggerated during vocal performance, they might take on a grotesque (and thus camp) form. As Koestenbaum teaches us, "[m]any manuals recommend singing in front of a mirror to ward off (...) convulsive grimacing", with "fish mouth" being cast off as the freakiest one (1993, 168). By contrast, for Koestenbaum as an opera queen, the opportunity given to opera divas to look grotesque while singing holds a positive, appealing quality; it is something to take pleasure from, providing, of course, that one chooses to embrace it. Notwithstanding that, the ambiguous stance towards the diva role (featuring theatricality and sincerity at the same time) manifest in karaoke acts by The Lisbon's pop-soul queens made it difficult to assess whether their staged sore grimaces of emotional pain were meant to be deployed strategically as a form of camp pleasure, especially when performing the "queerest" moments of "Chasing Pavements" (see above Examples 1, 2, and 3). But at least there was no doubt that the "freakishness" of such bodily gestures afforded delightful joys to The Lisbon's karaoke audience members with queer camp empathies (including myself).

The queer moments of "Chasing Pavements", marked in the previous analysis as the most dramatic points of the song and delivered expectedly in the high vocal register, did not only prompt the expulsion of convulsive grimacing on the faces of The Lisbon's karaoke pop-soul queens. Considering all the labor and special technique involved in the vocal production of belting, to which amateur karaoke singers are by no means attuned, the queer moments of the song would also turn frequently into the moments of voice "cracking". And it was there – in the voice breaking between vocal registers; in singing unexpectedly falsetto (that feigned, blank, weak, and shameful sound) after the song sections delivered with the full richness of the chest voice – that the song's queer moments would become even queerer ("super queer", as it were; zoomed to their extremes) in some of The Lisbon's karaoke performances of "Chasing Pavements". As Koestenbaum clarifies:

Falsetto seems profoundly perverse: a freakish sideshow: the place where voice goes wrong. And yet falsetto obeys the paradigm of all voice production. (...) The falsetto is part of the history of effeminacy... Long before anyone knew what a homosexual was, entire cultures knew to mock men who sang unconventionally high. (...) I have always feared the falsetto: voice of the bogeyman, voice of the unregenerate fag; voice of horror and loss and castration; floating voice, vanishing voice. (...) Falsetto is not a sin; the sin is breaking into it undisguisedly. Consistent falsetto, like expert drag, can give the illusion of truth. (...) The break between registers (...) is the place within one voice where the split between male and female occurs. The failure to disguise this gendered break is fatal to the art of "natural" voice production. (...) By coming out, gays provoke seismic shudders in the System-of-the-Line, just as, by revealing the register break, a singer exposes the fault lines inside a body that pretends to be only masculine or only feminine. (Or, by coming out, do we inadvertently reaffirm the divided world?) (1993, 164–167)

Very often the voice of the same karaoke performer would persist in breaking – and, thus, exposing the performativity of the "System-of-the-Line" of gender division – in the same manner and at the same crucial points of the song every single time s/he would sing "Chasing Pavements". For instance, in the case of pop-soul queen Jamie and his regular karaoke renditions of the song at The Lisbon pub, the recurring falsetto intonations of the words "this" and especially "but", both occupying the pitch G and concluding the opening verse of the song (see above Example 3), would immediately render his voice break wide open. In like manner, the chorus line of "Chasing Pavements" in the karaoke version of The Lisbon's female pop-soul queen Ann would continually fluctuate in terms of the quality of vocal production between "forceful" and "weak" surges of air. In the latter case, Ann would muffle particular words (namely, every appearance of the word "just", and sometimes the word "if" within the lyrical line "even **if** I knew my place") whose silencing in her performance stood in sharp contrast to their originally accentuated and campy rendition. This paradoxically might have sounded even campier in its effect than the original delivery. Beside this, Ann would also noticeably gasp for air between the music phrases, and let her voice fade, lose power, "shut down" at the endings of the smaller musical units that the chorus section consists of (i.e. falling on the words "pavements", "nowhere?", "there"). At any rate, the muted character of the incidentally produced falsetto in The Lisbon's karaoke performances of "Chasing Pavements" would each time brought about the same queer camp effect: a sense of disruption or rupture, occurring simultaneously in both aural and gender/sexual realms. Or, to use Koestenbaum's vocabulary, the falsetto as a "detour" from singing could signify just as well a "detour" from the taken-for-granted coherence and sameness of the karaoke performer's sex and gender identity.

In The Lisbon's queer karaoke space, I was drawn to three additional vocal renditions of "Chasing Pavements", whose idiosyncrasies can also be associated with the elements of queer camp. Richardson's (2006) provisional but comprehensive taxonomy of the characteristics constituting the male camp voice is taken here as a major point of reference. Not only does this taxonomy incorporate the portamento and (incidental) falsetto styles of singing that have already been addressed in the analysis above. It also proposes the categories of vocal styles that encapsulate well the particular details of karaoke renditions of "Chasing Pavements" by The Lisbon's three karaoke singers, I would designate here as pop-soul queens *A*, *B*, and *C*. These queer camp categories are: a) flamboyant vocal styles featuring excessive vibrato; b) affected vocal production brought about by nasality; and c) ostentatious – or to be more precise, ostentatiously humorous – theatricality.

The pop-soul queen *A* displayed in his karaoke interpretation of "Chasing Pavements" a high level of mastery in soul and R&B singing techniques. His vocal delivery in persistent falsetto abounded with resonant vibrato, applied on almost every tone of the song, whereas the tones of longer duration were routinely embellished with improvised riffs. In the repeated phrase "Or should I just keep chasing pavements" towards the end of the chorus section, he interpolated in addition an elaborate vocal run, turning upside-down the course of the original melody. In the typical manner of soul singing, he also made the original beat of the song come loose, by dragging or rushing its relatively steady metro-rhythmical structure all along the way. Note that in some other performance contexts, the described type of karaoke singing would by no means be considered queer camp. But in the queer karaoke space of The Lisbon, the excessively embellished vocal delivery, overabounding in vibrato, should be understood as nothing else than an apt manifestation of camp vocalities. Not only did the Lisbon's pop-soul queen *A* overemphasize the soul vocal mannerism present in Adele's singing style, but his insistence on the vocal timbre and practice coded as black was juxtaposed oddly with his external whiteness. In that regard, his karaoke rendition of "Chasing Pavements" can be said to have additionally "queered" the presumed correlation that most people unquestionably draw between a vocal timbre and the singer's race (see Eidsheim 2009).

The excessive vocal nasality in the karaoke delivery of "Chasing Pavements" by the Lisbon's female pop-soul queen *B* bore a striking resemblance to the country style of singing found, for example, in the vocal production of Justin Moore. Her karaoke performance was characterized by the heavy use of twangs throughout the entire song. The campiness in the manner of singing which is consistent with "vowel breaking" was additionally heightened by the sporadic accentuation of certain words, either those landing on the ascending leap within the vocal melodic structure – e.g. on the (bolded) words "don't **need** to think it over", "this is **love**" (in the opening verse), "I'll **never**

say enough”, “if I end up with you” (in the second verse), etc.; or those words resting on the on-beats of the melodic line and, thus, playing around with “the exaggerated sense of ‘phallic directionality’” mentioned in a queer reading of the original song above – e.g. the words “wrong”, “further” (in the opening verse), “**enough**”, “**exactly**” (in the second verse), etc. Another instance of camp exaggeration in *B*’s karaoke performance was achieved using a completely different type of accentuation. Specifically, she would each time pick the line “even if I knew **my** place” from the chorus section, and emphasized it with a shouting voice and a growl on the word “my”. Once again, it was difficult to estimate whether her performance meant to be serious or mocking; but, as pointed out above, inducing this sort of uncertainty among audience members is precisely one of the defining features of camp.

Playing the “ambiguity” card was, by contrast, less prominent in the vocal rendition of “Chasing Pavements” by pop-soul queen *C*. In fact, the comic output of his karaoke delivery was immediately picked up by The Lisbon’s crowd bursting occasionally into laughter out loud. The humorous effect was partly achieved here through the juxtaposition of two contrasting styles in *C*’s vocal delivery – one intended for the chorus section, and the other for the rest of the song. The former comprised singing in a raspy voice with a persistent nasal intonation. Added to this as a visual counterpart were funny grimaces engendered by forceful blinking and eyebrows-raising. The latter style of *C*’s vocal production, reserved for the song’s verses and bridge, seemed to replicate a cabaret manner of singing in that it was at times rhythmically free and imitative of the natural inflections of speech. As a result, the soul runs from the original vocal part were contracted, melodically simplified, often kept in the lower vocal register, and sometimes awkwardly accentuated. On a couple of occasions, karaoke performer *C* also used his speaking voice, unexpectedly, to highlight the meaning of the uttered phrases “this is love” (at the end of the opening verse) and “Should I give up?” (in its second appearance in the bridge). This theatrical gesture sparked immediate laughter from the audience. On the whole, the performance of “Chasing Pavements” by The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen *C* was truly hilarious in its “ostentatious theatricality”. As such, it can serve as an excellent case in point for Newton’s musings on camp:

Camp is for fun; the aim of camp is to make an audience laugh. In fact, it is a *system* of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. (...) Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable (1999, 106–107; emphasis in original).

It goes without saying that the reverse outcomes of camp's humor – “from laughter to pathos”, as Newton put it – can befall karaoke queens, too. For instance, during my karaoke fieldwork at The Lisbon, I observed a male-female duet whose joint karaoke performance ended up “tragically” for the male participant. Since the selected karaoke song did not fit his vocal range, he put the blame on his female duet partner for having made such a “terrible” song choice in the first place. Noticeably indisposed, he snapped at her afterwards with an angry frown on his face: “You’ve just ruined my career at this place!” The observed episode of overdramatic reaction in one of The Lisbon’s karaoke queens does not only exemplify well the camp’s capacity to transform easily from laughter to self-pity. The same episode is also indicative of so-called *camp speech*, which Morris (1993, 190) describes as a point where histrionics and hysteria meet.

### *Amy Winehouse “Valerie”: A Queer Reading*

“Valerie” is one of the cover songs, featuring Amy Winehouse as a vocalist, on the second studio album *Version* by the English music producer Mark Ronson. The single made an immediate success at the time of its release back in June 2007, thus coinciding with its popularity as a karaoke number at Liverpool’s The Lisbon pub during my ethnographic research.

The latter should come as no surprise considering that the single’s music video (directed by Robert Hales) invokes in part the practice and atmosphere of karaoke performance.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the video storyline involves several women who are invited by Ronson and his fellow musicians to climb up from the audience onto the stage and fill the gap created by the suddenly realized absence of the main vocalist (i.e. Amy).<sup>10</sup> Even though they are all miming to Winehouse’s pre-recorded voice throughout the entire video, one cannot help but think that the song recommends itself as well suited for a karaoke setting.

Taken on the whole, the queerest point in Winehouse’s “Valerie” is, arguably, the performance of gender subversion occurring in the lyrics. Namely, this song was originally recorded in 2006 by The Zutons, a Liverpool male indie band<sup>11</sup>, and dedicated to a former girlfriend, called Valerie, of the band’s lead singer Dave McCabe. Since the lyrics in Ronson’s cover version of the song remained intact, its original heteronormative disposition was camped-up through the newly established

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HLY1NTe04M>.

<sup>10</sup> Thinking of this video storyline in hindsight might give us an uncanny feeling of fulfilled prophecy – that Amy Winehouse will have been absent for good four years later.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the fact that the song was originally crafted by a local indie band added a new layer of meaning (that of being Liverpool-identified, that is, of being a Liverpoolian) to the karaoke experience of “Valerie” at The Lisbon.

relations of sex, gender, and desire in the lyrical narrative between the vocalist's subject position (i.e. Dave and Amy respectively as the imagined protagonists of the song's storyline) and the object of his/her desire (i.e. Valerie). The subversive effect of inverted gender and sex roles in Winehouse's rendition of "Valerie" becomes especially evident in the bridge section where the sentiment of longing is overtly enunciated ("And I've missed your ginger hair / And the way you like to dress / Won't you come on over / Stop making a fool out of me / Why don't you come on over, Valerie?"). No wonder, then, that this cover version generated anxieties among the public about the singer's "true" sexual orientation, but also about sexual practice more generally. Then again, as Hawkins (2009) stresses, the gender and sexual masquerade of pop is central to its seducing power over the public, and forms accordingly a necessary part of pop music pleasures.

Music-wise, "Valerie" does not differ much from the rest of Winehouse's music production, especially not from her second album *Back to Black* (released in October 2006 by Island Records), on which Ronson also worked as a producer. Evoked in either case are "the heydays of Motown and soul, R&B, jazz, girl groups and Phil Spector's Wall of Sound" (Barton 2011).

Despite its steady, offbeat groove, giving the song a cheery, danceable character, the main feel in "Valerie" is not really a happy one. Rather, it churns up nostalgic undertones using predominantly plagal chord changes and the reverberated fullness of the wall-of-sound effect (including here the spot-on use of sentimentally charged strings). The latter is not only indicative of the song's noteworthy proximity to the Motown Sound operating at many of its musical levels.<sup>12</sup> Of much greater relevance for the subject at hand are camp connotations that such a glossy outcome of the song's studio production can be said to hold. Indeed, with reference to the "authenticity/artificiality" dichotomy that regulates core value judgments in popular music discourses, the saccharine quality of Winehouse's version of "Valerie", foregrounded by the use of string instruments and percussions (above all, tubular bells and glockenspiel in the chorus), can be understood as a debased version of the song's original. For the affiliation of the latter with rock music facilitates the construction of its presumed virility and more sincere feel. It is therefore this "overabundance of artifice and calculated exertion" – on which Lee Oakes (2004, 70–71) elaborates in his discussion on the "madness" and, thus, perceived "badness" of pop music on the whole – that renders Winehouse's "Valerie" appealing to queer camp tastes.

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, in using tambourines to underscore the backbeat, widely known as "phallic" in the feminist musicologist discourse (see McClary 1991); in its catchy syncopated bass-guitar line, opening the song alone during the two first bars; and in its highly polished studio production with carefully arranged orchestral string and horn sections.

When all three layers of the analysis of Winehouse's "Valerie" are brought together (namely, the song's music video, lyrics, and music), several conclusions on its queer effects come to mind. From a broadly understood queer perspective, it can be said that the song and its music video throw into sharp relief a host of well-established dichotomies prevailing in the world of popular music. Specifically, the song's status as a cover version, its celebration of retro music styles coded as black, the group karaoke feel of the music video in which Amy's non-presence is filled with randomly selected female audience members lip-syncing to her voice – all these elements, thus, work together to blur the imagined boundaries between live and recorded performance, musicians and audience, original and copy, authenticity and artificiality, "black" (aural) interiority and "white" (corporeal) exteriority, and so on. It is exactly through this playfulness and ambiguity vis-à-vis the discursive system of polarized essences that the concept of queerness becomes fully tangible.

Moreover, the idea of camp queerness, as shown above, also operates in more specific domains of gender and sexual subjectivities. What, namely, comes to be unveiled through the subversive workings of the song's lyrical content and the camp implications of its Motown-inspired musical arrangement, is precisely the performativity of subject positions assumed in the process of gender/sexual identifications. The same logic of non-fixed, shifting subject positions is also symbolically replicated in the visual content of the song's music video, where several different women mime in turn to the original (Amy's) voice. In like manner, it is plausible to theorize (as I will do in the pages to come) that karaoke represents a potentially emancipatory medium for authenticating queer (sexual, gender, and otherwise) identities.

#### *Amy Winehouse "Valerie": The Lisbon's Karaoke Performances*

By setting up a model of same-sex desire in its lyrics, Winehouse's "Valerie" was, quite predictably, performed more readily by The Lisbon's self-identified lesbian karaoke singers. In fact, the song has been claimed by a wider lesbian community, judging by the commentary posted after the singer's death on one lesbian website (see Joosten 2011). Highlighted therein is the special significance that Winehouse's music has in general held for the lesbian community, in particular the "Valerie" song – as the following rhetorical question illustrates: "Who hasn't sung 'Valerie' at lesbian karaoke night?" While acknowledging the relevance of such insights, I would nonetheless argue that it was actually in karaoke renditions of the song by The Lisbon's *male* pop-soul queens that the workings of queer camp could be witnessed at its purest. This claim makes perfect sense in the light of the following consideration: What else could in The Lisbon's queer space make the already

subverted sex and gender roles in Winehouse's cover song queerer than its karaoke re-appropriations by male pop-soul queens!?

Given the uplifting groove of Winehouse's "Valerie", it comes as no surprise that the queerest karaoke performances of the song that I observed at The Lisbon made use of the camp strategies of exaggeration and theatricality. The three of them stood out as especially compelling in this regard, each illuminating equally well the camp's function to amuse and poke fun at the "queenliness" of the performer's pop-soul diva pose. However, in the cases of karaoke singers no. 1 and no. 2, the queer camp effects of their acts were accomplished unintentionally, combining authentic and theatrical approaches at once – a mixture which, in Dyer's view, lies at the heart of "the antithetical disposition of gay sensibility" (2004, 150). By contrast, The Lisbon's pop-soul queen no. 3 was seemingly in full control of gender performance when doing his karaoke version of "Valerie", thereby pushing his parodic attitude into the limelight. Let me attend, now, in greater detail to each of these pop soul queens and their karaoke performances respectively.

The karaoke rendition of "Valerie" by The Lisbon's pop-soul queen no. 1 was characterized by pronounced exuberance and overdramatized expression. In a queer camp twist, he retrieved the virile quality of the original (Zuton's) song by "kinging it up" (see Halberstam 2005, 128) with the type of soul vocal technique, coming close in its emotional intensity to James Brown's macho style of singing. Thus, in place of Winehouse's wide vibrato, frequent twangs, and prolonged nasal offsets, there was powerful belt singing "spiced up" all along the way with persistent rasps and a variety of exclamations, such as, "yeah!", "hey!", "oh!", "ah!". The latter were regularly interpolated between the sung phrases and intoned either in the chest voice as sharp yells and roars, most often abrasive and unsettling in their sonic effect; or in the effeminate falsetto voice as brief, soft howls.

The assertiveness of his vocal style was aptly complemented by the energetic bodily movements. His body was bouncing to the song's beat throughout the entire karaoke act, along with his palm-closed-finger-pointed fist repeatedly raised in the air – another telling gesture embodying the phallic power. Some other bodily actions also worked nicely together to render his performance earnest in the eyes of The Lisbon's crowd: for instance, the occasional head slides to the left and then to the right in one quick movement, repeated several times in a row to the song's beat; or tapping the left side of chest with the right palm – another symbolic gesture standing for singing from the bottom of one's heart. The Lisbon's pop-soul queen (or rather: "king") no. 1 appeared to be dead serious about his karaoke act. However, his emotionally sincere attitude indicated at the same time a sense of ironic distance towards the assumed role of pop-soul queen/king. Not only did a cheeky smile persisting on his face during the entire performance betray his faithful approach to

the role. Also, the insistence on “overdoing” his karaoke act (by kinging it up) even more reflected his conscious engagement with the camp’s theatricality.

A similar mixture of authenticity and theatricality was also displayed in the karaoke rendition of “Valerie” by The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen no. 2. But in contrast to the above-described performance, this one clearly strived to live up to the queenly standards of diva conduct. To begin with, the very visual appearance of the pop-soul queen no. 2 was notably stylish and attended with much care. He sported a casual-chic outfit (comprising tight jeans and designer T-shirt), complete with the perfectly groomed eyebrows, a blonde-dyed pompadour at the middle of his brown hair, cut short along the side of the head, the subtly gauged ears, and a couple of metal rings worn on both his hands.

The same level of refinement and artifice was also exhibited in the totality of his karaoke act. I observed therein few types of bodily gestures through which the aspired diva attitude was constituted. One was contained in the dancing part of his performance, where a special emphasis was placed on hip swinging to the beat, occasionally followed by the up-raised arm motion and finger snapping. “Miming” particular words of the song in hand gestures was another campy embodiment found in the karaoke performance by The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen no. 2. For instance, he very often mimed the pronoun “you” (as in the line “Did **you** have to go to jail”) by stabbing his index finger in the air as if pointing to the subject of his address in the song (i.e. Valerie). The words connoting the head-related matters (as in the line “And in my **head** I paint a picture”, or in “are you still **dizzy**?”) were also illustrated with the help of index finger, tapping this time the side of his head. In the part of the song inquiring about Valerie’s current hair color, he grabbed and twisted a piece of his dyed hair between his thumb and index fingers, and showed it to the audience. And when the crucial line of the song came up: “Why don’t you **come on over**, Valerie?”, he seductively curled his index finger towards himself.

However, the most queenly and, certainly, most peculiar embodiment accompanying his karaoke act was the odd gesture of rolling in the lips so that they rolled across one another – a gesture which was reserved for brief moments of rest in the vocal part, turning up just before the continuation of the next singing phrase. Over the course of his performance, this lip mannerism, resembling somewhat a preening gesture for women evening out lipstick, evolved rapidly into the recurring brisk sound effect of lip-smacking.

No less campy in its effect was the theatrical quality of his vocal delivery towards the end of the song. Having previously combined several modes of singing – ranging from the belt-singing voice (with rare rasps) and its corresponding crying grimace, to the falsetto voice manipulated with the eyes shut – The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen no. 2 pushed his voice to the limit in the last section of the

song (commencing immediately before the last rendition of the chorus) to fully shine in his wannabe diva role. This self-aggrandizing quest for vocal dominance, based on the production of excessive vibrato and elaborate riffs and runs, was not only determined by the structure of the “Valerie” song, whose coda section permitted a demonstration of Winehouse’s vocal abilities, too. It was additionally premised on the narcissistic need of pop-soul queen no. 2 to beat the original’s vocal delivery. This was accomplished through an immense vocal effort to sing ceaselessly in large chunks until the end of the song, by connecting the ending syllable of one vocal phrase (e.g. “Stop making a fool out of **me**”) to the opening syllable of the following phrase (e.g. “**Why** don’t you come on over, Valerie?”) without break. This kind of “oversinging” produced, admittedly, the hypnotizing effect on The Lisbon’s queer crowd.

Lastly, the karaoke rendition of “Valerie” by The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen no. 3 intentionally parodied the original soulfulness of the song. This was achieved by making both the body and the voice a site of ridicule. The incongruity produced between the hyper-idealized image of the muscled gay body that karaoke singer no. 3 put on display, and the spectacular embodiment of girlish femininity enacted on The Lisbon’s karaoke stage, was truly effective in disclosing the performativity of gender codes. Every single bodily movement he made was imbued with theatricality: a wide palette of facial expressions, ranging from innocent, through to seductive with a predatory intent, to comically agonizing; or, a distinct dance style, very much flamboyant in its silliness and ostensible clumsiness, with the arms bouncing freely along the body and occasional jumps in the same spot, as in the excitement of a child.

A combination of these bodily movements, deliberately choreographed to appear awkward and misplaced, alternated at short intervals with graceful moments of diva conduct. The Lisbon’s pop-soul queen no. 3 would either sporadically lift up his leg when singing (a clichéd feminine gesture associated with the kissing scenes from the old Hollywood movies), or tilt the head sideways and a bit forward over the shoulder curved forward in the same direction (as in seductive posing for photo shooting sessions, similar to the over-the-shoulder pose, but without looking back), or flow his upper body in a snake-like movement. The expressions of stylized effeminacy were, however, played out most stunningly through the movements of his (mike-free) hand – placed either on his hip, or stuck in the limp-wrist position, or thrown up/down as in a gesture of exasperation – at the points of the song that are crucial in terms of their vocal performance demands (usually at the endings of vocal phrases) and, less often, in terms of their denotative meaning (as in the line: “**Why** don’t you come on over, Valerie?”).

The described queer embodiment was suitably matched with a special type of “vocal costume” that pop-soul queen no. 3 put on for his karaoke act at The Lisbon. The gravelly sound and the nasal

inflection of his vocal delivery held something of a vexing, caricatured quality similar to Brian Johnson's (from AC/DC) raspy singing, or even to Beavis's (from the American animated sitcom *Beavis and Butt-head*) persistent grunts. What made his karaoke delivery sound additionally campy was a strong inclination towards a singing style with the exaggerated accents, especially in the last rendition of the bridge section with each accent "roared" on the strongest beat of the vocal phrases therein (i.e. on the words "since", "body", "missed", "way"). Equally amusing were occasional reversals of the originally descending melodic pattern of the key vocal line "Valerie" within the chorus part, which he would intonate to sound as a question mark. Finally, in the coda section of the song, his camp attitude surfaced once again in his deliberate efforts to ridicule the mannerism of soul vocal technique by extensively drawling the vowels in the sung word "Valerie" – an instance of vocal parody that inevitably lent to his face an almost deranged look.

### **Karaoke as a Thirdspace: Queering Karaoke Beyond The Lisbon's Queer Space**

In the final section of this article, I intend to develop a theoretical argument about the queer camp potential of karaoke practice beyond the situatedness of my ethnographic study. Notwithstanding the assumption that in contexts other than Western(ized) ones the notion of queerness might take on different forms (see McLelland 2006, 296–300), I propose that karaoke may be considered and exercised as a queer camp practice, constituting thereby a Thirdspace (Soja 1996). To support my claim, I summarize some of the crucial arguments that have been brought up in the discussion above, in parallel with bringing to the table some additional insights into the subject matter.

It has long been recognized in academia (see, for example, Devitt 2006; Mungen 2006; Halberstam 2005; Sullivan 2003) that the relationship between mainstream media and queer cultures is of a dialectical nature: they both appropriate from one another, each for their own purposes. So is the case with mainstream pop, where, as mentioned above with reference to Hawkins (2006; 2009), the appropriation of queerness is almost a norm, even if most often showcased within the presumed heteronormative framework. Hawkins also maintains that such instances of gender masquerade in pop are predicated upon the privilege of pop celebrities – if not their cultural function (Turner cited in Hawkins 2009, 105) – to create, play, and capitalize on sexual and gender ambiguities in their self-representation. I would like to stretch his argument further by asserting that karaoke, as a medium (among many others in times of digital convergence) bridging the gap between mass-mediated cultural forms and everyday life, permits this privilege to be exercised by non-

celebrities, too. Specifically, it allows the standard pop practices of genderplay to migrate and become integrated into the spheres of the everyday and the semi-public/semi-private, with karaoke bars/pubs and YouTube videos facilitating this activity perhaps most effectively.

By extension, karaoke can also be said to have a capacity to produce a *queer space*, but of different kind than that implied and advocated by radical queer critics of normative spatial/sociocultural/sexual practices (see, for instance, *Society and Space* 2012; Halberstam 2005; Rushbrook 2002). The queerness of karaoke space, as demonstrated by the previous analysis, is not necessarily constituted by the oppositional practices of “queer subcultures”, not even at queer places such as Liverpool’s The Lisbon pub. Rather, karaoke space is at best delineated by the workings of queer camp’s ambiguities, challenging (hetero)normative behavior at the same time as complying with it. What is at stake here are, thus, those queer camp components of karaoke practice that facilitate “the polymorphous states of human difference”, to borrow Hawkins’s (2006, 291) expression, as part of people’s everyday life experience.

Furthermore, I insist on the spatial component of karaoke practice because it helps me frame the moments of queering in karaoke experience. Drawing on Soja’s (1996) theorization of a multiplicity of spaces, I argue that karaoke should be viewed as an instance of Thirdspace par excellence.<sup>13</sup> Karaoke space is both *real* (a Firstspace perspective) and *imagined* (a Secondspace perspective), and *more* (a Thirdspace perspective). It is real in the materiality of cultural texts and practices it accommodates, and the embeddedness of these in particular sociocultural contexts as well as in a wider network of social relations of (re)production. Karaoke space is at the same time imagined through the representational discourses and subjective imaginaries of its users and observers. Specifically, karaoke space is conceived and experienced as a space of fun, play, and joke; a space of all sorts of phantasms, capable of evoking different kinds of feelings and memories; a space of courtship, friendship, and togetherness, but also a space of competition and social comparison. Finally, what could create this “third” term, “an-Other term”, another mode of karaoke’s spatial imagination that both draws upon and extends beyond the boundaries of its First- and Second-spaces, is precisely the moment of “queering-as-Othering” inherent in karaoke practice.

There are multiple points where such “queering-as-Othering” reveals itself in karaoke’s Thirdspace. To begin with, the easy accessibility, performance context, and participatory nature of karaoke practice makes it by definition well suited for blurring many boundaries and polarized essences, such as those

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<sup>13</sup> My proposal is not entirely new considering that some other cultural practices, such as LGBTQ club cultures, have been seen as constituting Thirdspaces as well (see Roseneil 2006).

established through familiar distinctions between cultural production and consumption, live and mediated, reality and fantasy, the mundanity of everyday life and the “suspension of everyday time” (Fast cited in Hawkins 2009, 66), fan and star, amateur and professional (cf. Lee Oakes 2006). In fact, not only did my fieldwork observations of The Lisbon’s karaoke events show that few pop songs came to be identified with the karaoke regulars who kept on performing them rather than with their original artists. The British karaoke studies scholar Kelly has likewise acknowledged the capacity of karaoke practice to disassociate pop songs from the exclusivity of the music industry field, and allow amateur karaoke singers to appropriate them for their own purposes,

thus closing the gap between amateur and professional. This represents a shift from a close identification between professional singer and song to a disproportionate emphasis on the song itself which has been reinvented for the karaoke format and the amateur singer (1998, 89).

Another queer camp constituent “thirding” karaoke space is rooted in the discourses of bad music (see Frith 2004). Being essentially carried out in everyday, localized, micro-cultural contexts, karaoke practice is commonly thought of as producing poor (i.e. “bad”) aesthetic results, due to the inherent musical incompetence, crudity, and inferiority that surround it. The perceived badness of karaoke might also be linked to its deprived aesthetic status as an inauthentic musical practice, implicated in “a wider culture of the copy” that thrives in today’s (Western) society (Reynolds 2011, 53). Moreover, the situatedness of karaoke practice prevents it from fulfilling the modernist norms of universality and transcendence across the confinements of time and space that “genuine” art (music) is said to embody. The low aesthetic status of karaoke conflates, predictably, with its dwelling on the social margins of cultural life. Since “the ‘bad music’ side of the good/bad equation is typically aligned with the Other” (Lee Oakes 2004, 66), so is karaoke’s alignment with marginalized social groups, most often along the class lines.

Yet, in its subversive workings, karaoke overthrows the established division between good and bad taste by proposing alternative criteria for assessing pop music. For instance, both Kelly’s (1998) and my ethnographic surveys of karaoke events have proven that many karaoke performers make selections of songs according to their vocal range and competence, or according to the crowd’s mood. Alternatively, the good/bad distinction becomes challenged simply by virtue of reframing apparently bad songs and karaoke performances into sites of guilty pleasures. In consequence, as Lee Oakes underlines,

the subversion of good and bad aesthetic classifications (...) is directly linked to the destabilization of other too-tidy oppositions and assumptions surrounding race, gender, class, and other means of social identifications (2004, 78).

On that note, it is important to reiterate that karaoke essentially involves performance in drag, given the gap arising between the actor (i.e. karaoke singer) and their role (i.e. the assumed attitude towards the selected song and its content, the subject position(s) offered therein, the song's original performance and performer). It goes without saying that every performance act necessitates a similar kind of distance, but in karaoke space such distance is foregrounded by the very *raison d'être* of this cultural practice – which is to appropriate and replicate already existing products of pop music. This doubleness of karaoke performance opens up a productive (Third)space for one's masquerading along the gender lines; for, ultimately, one's gender can be made authentic and real only through "the act of creating a convincing fake" (Lee Oakes 2006, 49). In the performance space of karaoke, the moment of "queering-as-Othering" occurs when camp – or alternatively king – is used (whether strategically or not) to expose the performative basis of gender and sexuality.

Karaoke space could also potentially be utilized for similar "queering" interventions that call into question other social identifiers such as those of race, ethnicity, age, locality, and so on (cf. Lee Oakes 2004). Notwithstanding the foregoing, my ethnographic study on The Lisbon's karaoke events mainly sought to shed light on the ambiguities and, at times, subversive workings of queer camp (re)signification in the realms of sexuality and gender. The detailed analysis above hopefully illuminated convincingly enough the central importance of embodiment and vocalities therein. Specifically, the analysis showcased that it was largely through elaborate enactments of diva conduct and a variety of queer camp expressions in vocal delivery that The Lisbon's pop-soul queens demonstrated their commitment to the marginal, trashy, flawed, incongruous, exaggerated, theatrical, humorous, ironic, and paradoxically: sincere. In The Lisbon's queer space, the deployments of queer camp strategies in karaoke performances and the self-expressive and retaliatory functions they served (and most likely continue to serve) for the pub's queer crowd, are thus undeniable.

Beyond queer spaces such as Liverpool's The Lisbon pub, the readings of queer camp occurrences surrounding karaoke practice depend more noticeably upon various contextual contingencies. This fact alone calls attention to the more general problematic of ambiguous effects inherent in queering – namely, that it can be regarded either as an act of critical/subversive/progressive engagement, or as essentially conforming/apolitical/conservative in its outcomes (see Lee Oakes 2004). I wish nonetheless to conclude this article on a high note by focusing on the productive side of queering within the said

equation. When discussing karaoke's Thirdspace, it is primarily through the queer camp's destabilizing/transgressive function, through "queering-as-Othering", that karaoke can promote difference. If constructed and employed that way, karaoke's Thirdspace can be said to partake in a utopian project of imagining and creating a fully free and tolerant society of equal rights for everyone.

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