

Performing k.d. lang

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Cet essai utilise le principe de la performances pour examiner les interactions complexes de résistance, de subversion et des glissements qui ont façonné l'image iconique de k g lang dans les communautés musicale et lesbienne.

Much recent critical theory, be it of the literary, queer, or postcolonial variety, stresses the idea of identity as performance. As Jonathan Culler noted recently, the performative theory of gender and sexuality has opened up “resources from which resistance, subversions, and displacement are forged” (103). This idea is crucial to the reception and understanding of k.d. lang, both as a musician of singularly protean qualities, and as a media celebrity. lang is widely regarded as an outstanding musician whose appeal has transcended and defied traditional categories of musical genre. Intense interest in her music and personal life has engendered much scrutiny in the popular media on the one hand, and several serious biographical studies on the other. She is regarded as an icon and role model, especially within the gay and lesbian community. But throughout her career, lang has proven to be an elusive and slippery subject upon which diverse observers have placed a wide variety of interpretations.

Ending earlier speculation about her sexuality, lang outed herself in a famous interview in the June 1992 issue of the gay and lesbian newsmagazine *The Advocate* (Lemon). Soon after her interview with *The Advocate*, a number of contentious issues arose with regard to the reception, both in the mainstream media and in the gay and lesbian community, of her openly acknowledged lesbianism.

The first monograph on k.d. lang was by William Robertson; it was published shortly after the interview in *The Advocate*. With popular musician biographies, timing is everything. Robertson's timing was impeccable. Mainstream media interest in lang was peaking, and people were curious to know more about the singer—both because of the popularity of her music, and also on account of her openly acknowledged lesbianism. Robertson's book

was cobbled together from three or four major magazine articles and interviews with a handful of people casually acquainted with lang; the author had no access to the singer herself. Nevertheless, the book sold over 60,000 copies, making it at the time the best-selling book ever on a Canadian musician. Robertson deals with lang's lesbianism briefly, but in a positive way, noting that the “sad fact of a generally homophobic society” (103) caused lang to stay in the closet until 1992. He mentions her happiness at being out, and then quickly returns to a discussion of her music, which is the focal point throughout his book.

But lang's life story was quickly co-opted by writers for the lesbian community, beginning in 1994 with Victoria Starr, who had been a music journalist with *Outweek*, the magazine famous for outing prominent celebrities. Other writers who followed in Starr's footsteps to celebrate lang's lesbianism included Martha Mockus (1994), Lee Fleming (1996), Louise Allen (1997), Sandra Brandenburg (1997), Paula Martinac (1997), Rose Collis (1999), and Sheila Whiteley (2000), among others.¹ Some of these writers reversed Robertson's procedure by choosing to foreground lang's sexuality rather than her music. This process was not without its attendant difficulties for lang, who now found herself not just a celebrity musician, but a prominent spokesperson and role model for the lesbian community. Her every action and statement was subject to intense media scrutiny and analysis. As a result of the intense critical backlash after her famous “Meat Stinks” commercial with Lulu the cow in 1990 (the pro-vegetarianism ad was vociferously attacked by some in cattle country), lang was acutely aware of how media fame cuts with a double-edged sword. Thrust suddenly into the limelight, she found it difficult to satisfy some political activists in the lesbian community while not alienating the rest of her audience, which, although it had a solid lesbian core, was broadly based (as witness her Grammy Awards in 1988, 1989, and 1992).

This period of intense media exposure coincided with

a shift in musical style for lang. Her first four albums are in a style that could be broadly categorized as country music. Though often overtly homophobic in its lyrics and mediated images, country music nevertheless has a strong following within the gay community and is often heard in gay bars; Whiteley notes that “Stand by Your Man” has enjoyed unexpected popularity as an alternative gay anthem (165). Mockus states further that “the strict gender definition presented in country music provides excellent material for queer drag and butch-femme role-playing” (260). When her first four albums were released, though, lang had not yet come out as a lesbian, perhaps because of fears about alienating the mainstream country music audience. Her teasing remarks during this period, such as “I’m a l, l, l ... Liberace fan” gave a frisson of excitement and anticipation to her interviews for the mainstream media, but were found to be annoying by many lesbians, as Mockus notes (266–67).

After her first four albums were by and large rejected by mainstream country music institutions (including radio stations), lang decided that it was time to dissolve her band the Reclines (named after country singer Patsy Cline, of whom lang claimed at one point to be the reincarnation) and concentrate on songwriting with band member Ben Mink. It was with Mink that lang wrote what would become her most popular song, “Constant Craving” from the 1992 album *Ingénue*, which marked her crossover from country music to the adult contemporary format. It is in the latter style, broadly defined, that lang has remained to the present day. She has become something of an establishment figure in the process: she recorded and toured with Tony Bennett in 2002, and sang on the soundtrack for the Disney movie *Home on the Range* in 2004, for instance.

Although lang’s initial success was in country music, she refused to perform the identity of a typical country musician. When she first came to widespread notice in the mid-1980s, she was renowned for her quirky image, labelled “cowpunk” (see Figure 1). The cowpunk image included both her appearance—spiky hair, retro glasses (with no lenses), sawn-off cowboy boots, etc.—and her onstage antics as a performer, which were manic and mischievous. After travelling to Nashville to make her third album, *Shadowland* (1988), lang toned down her image and performance style somewhat. On the cover of *Absolute Torch and Twang* (her fourth album, released in 1989; see Figure 2) she posed in the middle of a wheat field with cowboy hat in hand: a traditional “country” image. But the short hair, together with her generally androgynous physical appearance and outfit, made her look more like a cowboy in drag rather than a cowgirl. As Judith Butler notes, butch identity “is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay” (Butler 156–57). lang’s “cowboy” image on *Absolute Torch and Twang*,



Figure 1: k.d. lang in August 1984 at the Edmonton Folk Festival (© Glen King; used with permission)



Figure 2: the cover of k.d. lang’s fourth album, *Absolute Torch and Twang* (1989) (©Warner Bros. Records Inc.; used with permission)

released a year before Butler’s book, is a striking visual correlative of Butler’s interpretation of butch identity.

This playing with gender identity and the idea of gender as performance was highlighted again with lang’s eighth album, *Drag*, from 1997 (see Figure 3). The title is a punning reference to the fact that the songs on the recording are all about cigarettes and smoking, and also to

the idea of the drag artist. On the cover, lang poses with an invisible cigarette as a woman dressed as a man dressing as a woman. The coy ambiguity of the title of the album is thus matched perfectly by the image of lang that appears on its cover.

In the photo on *Drag*, lang seems to be wearing the same suit that she wore for the famous *Vanity Fair* magazine cover of August 1993, in which she sits in a barber chair and is shaved by a scantily clad Cindy Crawford (see Figure 4). The idea for the *Vanity Fair* pose was lang's, but it was the late Herb Ritts, the photographer for the shoot, who supplied Crawford to do the shaving. The cover cemented lang's reputation as a celebrity with a singularly quirky sense of humour, and it is widely regarded as an important iconic image marking the acceptance of lesbianism by the mainstream media.²

This image created one of the most famous magazine covers of the 1990s, and is worth a moment's reflection. It was a defining moment in the popularization of lesbian sexuality, a movement that began in the mid-1980s and is popularly known as "lesbian chic." Many lesbian political activists are uncomfortable with this phenomenon, which draws on conventional portrayals of femininity to privilege the image of feminine lesbianism at the expense of masculine lesbianism. Louise Allen argues that "lesbian chic is a reactionary strategy on the part of the dominant media" (11) and she explains further that it "underscores the homophobia characteristic of the commodification of lesbian chic in the media" (15).

In light of Allen's theory, it is difficult not to be struck by the multiple conflicting messages being thrown up by the *Vanity Fair* cover. In an interview with *Ikon* magazine two years later, lang was asked how she liked the portrayal of Crawford in the photo. She replied, "I didn't like what she was wearing, to tell you the truth. I wasn't keen on the boots. I wasn't keen on the teddy...I've developed a slight distaste for the perpetuation of overt sexuality" (Brown). lang, whose image militates against the precepts of lesbian chic, stands in for the masculine lesbian while Crawford represents the feminine lesbian in this classic butch/femme pairing. The denaturalization and instability of the categories "male" and "female" in the photo expose the constructed status of gender as performance. We know that lang does not need a shave, and so what is being enacted is obviously a role-playing fantasy. At the same time, the photo imitates conventional magazine covers, such as Norman Rockwell's famous portraits for the *Saturday Evening Post* and may even be modelled on a specific Rockwell painting: *Going on Sixteen - Shear Agony*), only to destabilize and question the underlying assumptions of the original.

In this light, the *Vanity Fair* cover can be read as an accurate representation of lang's influence as an artist in contemporary North American society. lang has forged an artistic career outside the norms and expectations of mainstream North American media by preserving the

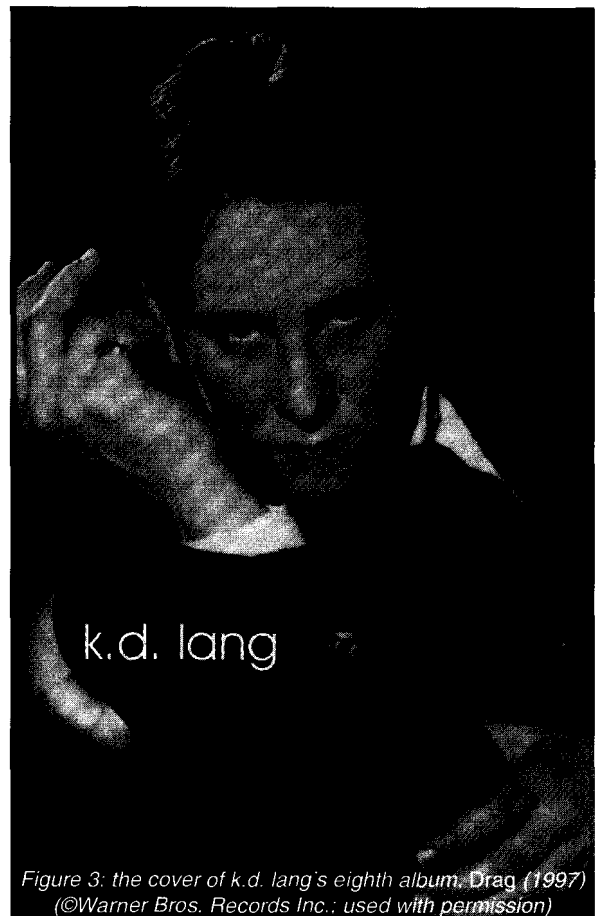


Figure 3: the cover of k.d. lang's eighth album, *Drag* (1997)
(©Warner Bros. Records Inc.; used with permission)

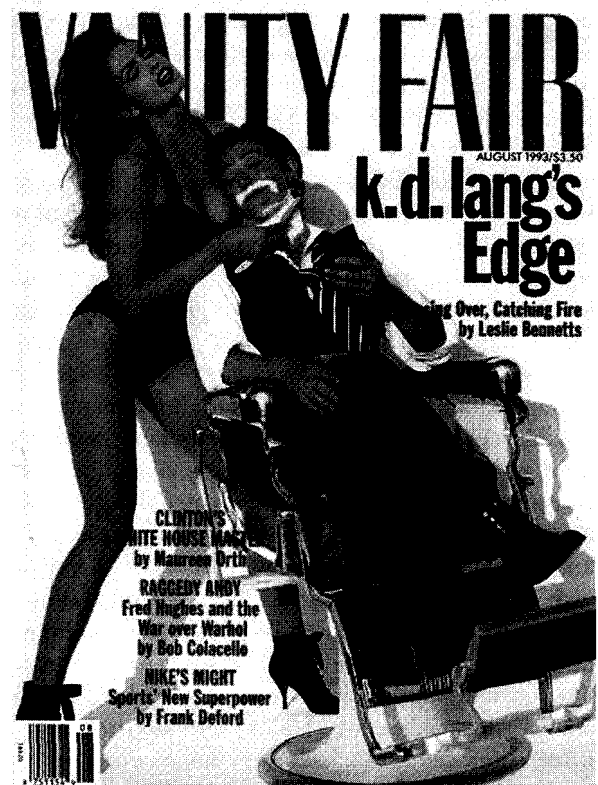


Figure 4: Cindy Crawford and k.d. lang on the cover of the August 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair*
(©Condé Nast Publications; used with permission)

right to reinvent herself and live life on her own terms in the face of intense media scrutiny and pressures. From cowpunk tomboy to androgynous drag artist to sedate establishment crooner, lang has changed and evolved in often surprising ways during the past twenty years. She may have failed to please some of her fans along the way, and at times she has no doubt disappointed those who would try to place her in a tightly confined role (either sexual or musical), but nevertheless her career bears witness to the creative achievements that can be won by a clever and inspired manipulation of the themes of resistance, subversion, and displacement.

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¹David Bennahum compiled what one might call an "unauthorized autobiography," a singular contribution to a rare literary genre.

²The photo was chosen as an illustration for Section VII "Divas and discos" of the article "Lesbian and Gay Music" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, but was edited out of the final version (as were all other illustrations for the article; see Brett and Wood 2001) The caption for the photo in *The New Grove* was to have read "k. d. lang with Cindy Crawford on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 1993, changing forever the representation of lesbians in the media" (Brett and Wood 2002).

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PATIENCE WHEATLEY

For Elinor

In the grey twilight of December
words dance between tree trunks
clamouring to be let in
to the warm activity of
editing

they can only hang in trees
rustling together and making something
like
squirrels' dark winter
houses

shaking their tails
the words reproduce
making their own unasked for
meaning until

the work under my eyes
asserts its shape
shouts what it
is

biblical language and all,
birthing,
it pushes through to take its
heavy place

*Patience Wheatley's third book of poetry was published
by Pendass Productions.*