

**University of Alberta**

Céline Dion and Shania Twain: The Globalization of Canada's Pop Divas

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Music

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## **Abstract**

As Canada's best-selling female pop stars, Céline Dion and Shania Twain have launched internationally successful careers by negotiating the sociocultural boundaries, both real and imagined, between Canada, the United States, and beyond. Their careers represent rich case studies in the phenomenon of global popular music networks. How do they and their marketers and producers "translate" their music so it can be so widely understood and appreciated? My research aims to answer this question by mapping out how Céline and Shania have both embodied certain widely appealing qualities and appropriated a multiplicity of national identities, iconographies, and musical traditions in their work. My consideration of Céline's and Shania's music and personae in the context of the global music industry, international fan communities, and Las Vegas where both perform residency shows sheds light on the mechanisms behind superstardom and poses questions about the very meaning of popularity.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Who is Céline Dion?.....	15
Chapter 2: Who is Shania Twain?.....	27
Chapter 3: What is Céline's Music?.....	45
Chapter 4: What is Shania's Music?.....	55
Chapter 5: Céline in Las Vegas.....	69
Chapter 6: Shania in Las Vegas.....	100
Chapter 7: Why Compare Céline and Shania?.....	125
Conclusions.....	147
Bibliography.....	151

## Introduction

What makes a global superstar? That is the key question driving my research on Canadian pop divas Céline Dion and Shania Twain, two of the best-selling female musicians of all time. Both have launched internationally successful careers by navigating the sociocultural borders, real and imagined, between Canada, the United States, and the wider world outside of North America. Their songs circulate with the air we breathe in malls and grocery stores. They also circulate around the world via recordings and performance tours. How do they and their marketers and producers “translate” their music so it can be so widely understood and appreciated?

My research in fan communities, the popular music industry, and Las Vegas where both stars perform suggests that the source of their appeal is their appropriation of a pastiche of identities, iconographies, and musical traditions in recordings, music videos, performances, and interviews. Like mosaics, their public personae are comprised of many diverse elements, ensuring that diverse people are able to find something to like about them.

Céline sings not just in English and French but also in numerous other languages. She further broadens her appeal by drawing on the music and performance styles of iconic stars like Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, and Barbra Streisand. Shania is similarly chameleonic. She is part pop star, part country singer, giving her a massive target audience. Her album *Up!* even gave her a third musical identity, being released in pop, country, and Bollywood versions.

Céline’s and Shania’s public personalities also play a role in generating their broad appeal. Céline’s public image as a perfect mother and wife radiates idealized

notions of love and family that transcend borders. Shania's well-known tragic personal narratives, from her parents' early deaths in a car crash to her husband's affair with her best friend, render her a sympathetic character in the public eye.

Overall, my consideration of Céline's and Shania's music and personae in the context of the global music industry and international fan communities aims to shed light not just on the mechanisms behind superstardom but also on the very meaning of popularity. Like all public figures, Céline and Shania are divisive. What we love and love to hate about them, though, is deeply suggestive of sociocultural values. For we are each part of their superstardom, whether by passively turning on the radio or actively purchasing concert tickets.

*Rationale: Why Compare Céline and Shania?*

Céline is famous for her power ballads, and Shania for her distinctive upbeat brand of country-pop. Céline is a virtuosic mezzo-soprano while Shania is a singer-songwriter. But the two have more in common than one might at first imagine. First of all, the fan bases they have cultivated are quite similar. Many of their fans share a positive outlook on life and a family-oriented perspective, qualities that they appreciate in the stars themselves and their all ages-appropriate music. Both stars have also made reality show-style documentaries for the Oprah Winfrey Network, offering the public windows into their personal lives. Moreover, both are "manmade" stars whose careers likely would not have been nearly as successful were it not for their husband-collaborators, in Céline's case manager René Angélil and in Shania's case music producer Mutt Lange. Furthermore, in the face of their stunning popularity, critics often brand both stars' music saccharine, superficial, and overprocessed. Finally, though

Céline's and Shania's music falls under different genres and they have each followed different career paths, those paths have led both of them to Las Vegas where they currently perform residency shows at Caesars Palace.

Comparing Céline and Shania reveals the extent to which their extrinsic differences are secondary to their intrinsic similarities. Each comes in different packaging, but many of the same mechanisms have propelled them to global superstardom and enabled them to maintain that status from one decade to the next. In other words, comparing the two draws into relief some of the key ingredients to becoming an international pop phenomenon. Juxtaposing Céline and Shania also illuminates some of the challenges faced by female musicians attempting to achieve cultural legitimation and by Canadian musicians striving for international careers. It further serves to probe the usefulness of a national paradigm for understanding musicians who increasingly exist only in transnational terms.

Céline's and Shania's careers took off in the nineties, a time when other Canadian female singers like Alanis Morissette and Sarah McLachlan were also rising to international prominence. Two decades later, though, these other artists have faded from mainstream prominence, and Céline and Shania are in a special class of their own with sustained relevance and recognizability on par with that of Michael Jackson and Madonna. Why have these two achieved massive commercial success to a degree that countless others have not? Close examination of their career strategies suggests answers.

Tyson Parker, Vice President of Corporate Communications and National Media and Artist Relations at Shania's label, Universal Music Canada, says that Universal's



core strategy in marketing its roster of musicians is to “fish where the fishes are.”<sup>1</sup> The key to both Céline’s and Shania’s success seems to be their active efforts to do just that on many different levels. They never merely release music. They meet audiences at their own level, mobilizing everything from marketing to musical to rhetorical tactics in the process. The result is that they have released their music in the right formats and styles to the right geocultural demographics.

No other contemporary North American pop star has sung in Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish, French, and Italian (as Céline has) or released the same music in pop, country, and Bollywood stylings (as Shania has) to cross geocultural borders and satisfy diverse tastes. They and the teams of producers and marketers behind them appear to understand what Aristotle did of the power of pathos.<sup>2</sup> Céline and Shania are, indeed, expert rhetoricians. Their emotionally appealing efforts to meet music listeners on their own terms make the metaphysical barrier between star and self melt away for fans, albeit while provoking cynicism from critics who see these appeals as business strategies above all else.

#### *Literature Review*

My research on Céline and Shania draws on literature from the domains of ethnomusicology, popular music studies, sociology, media studies, and literary studies. Despite their sociocultural significance, questions of Céline’s and Shania’s global appeal remain to a significant extent unanswered in scholarly literature. Both Céline and Shania rarely come up in the work of ethnomusicologists, or for that matter in that of

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<sup>1</sup> Tyson Parker, telephone interview, August 31, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1991.

musicologists and popular music scholars. They are also seldom considered alongside each other.

Soprano Linda Lister's "Divafication: The Deification of Modern Female Pop Stars" (2001) is a rare exception, addressing both stars in the context of a wider discussion of three identifiable diva typologies in contemporary popular music: prima divas (virtuosic singers like Céline), madonnas (pop innovators like Shania), and liliths (singer-songwriters like Jewel). Cultural historian Ryan Edwardson's *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (2009) and pop culture critic Greg Potter's *Hand Me Down World: The Canadian Pop-Rock Paradox* (1999) also consider both Céline and Shania as part of wider discussions on the collective national significance of Canadian popular music.

Overall, most literature currently available on Céline and Shania considers them individually and originates in fields outside of music like communications, sociology, and literary studies. Céline, for her part, has been studied as a symbol of Canadian and especially Québécois identity. Sociologist Frédéric Demers examines her role as a Québécois icon in a French book whose title translates as *Céline Dion and Québécois Identity: "The little girl from Charlemagne among the greats!"* (1999). Literary scholar Erin Hurley also considers Céline as a symbol of *québécoisité* in terms of her accent, biography, and role as a national emotional labourer in *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (2011). In a similar vein, communications scholar Line Grenier casts Céline as a Québécois national hero and model happy entrepreneur in a French article whose title translates as "Issues of Fame and Public Memory: The Céline Dion Phenomenon in Québec" (2001). Sociologist David

Young examines wider national perceptions of Céline through analysis of media coverage in “Céline Dion, the ADISQ Controversy, and the Anglophone Press in Canada” (1999) and “Céline Dion, National Unity, and the English-Language Press in Canada” (2001).

More specific to my line of inquiry, Hurley considers the parallels between Céline and Las Vegas in terms of their shared ethos and aesthetic of transformation in “Céline Dion’s Las Vegas Aesthetics” (2007). Grenier, for her part, has examined the global appeal of Céline’s music and pop star persona as in an Italian article whose title translates as “Circulation, Valorization and Location of Global Pop Music: The Case of Céline Dion” (2006). Music critic Carl Wilson also takes up the topic of Céline’s globalization in *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (2007) which probes love and hate of Céline in terms of the politics of musical taste. In “ ‘Country Roads’ to Globalization: Sociological Models for Understanding American Popular Music in China” (2009), Heidi Netz Rupke and Grant Blank consider questions of Céline’s appeal along with that of other North American easy listening musicians specifically in China. Communications scholar Masahiro Yasuda additionally treats the topic of Céline’s concerted efforts to go “glocal” in his unpublished paper “Localising Dion: Transnational Music Industries and Local Markets” (1999).

While research on Céline exists largely on the fringes of academia, Shania remains almost altogether shut out of academia. Only passing considerations of her music and persona can be found in articles on broader country music topics. In “ ‘Alternative’ to What? O Brother, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music” (2005), ethnomusicologist Aaron A. Fox considers Shania’s working-class identity, but only as a

coda to his wider discussion of alternative country music and the problems associated with defining just what 'alternative' means. Shania, as a mainstream country singer whose working-class roots and persona make her 'alternative' in a certain light, serves only as a problematic contrast piece. In "Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom" (2002), communications scholar Joli Jensen examines how the apparent pandering of nineties boom singers—Shania, Garth Brooks, et al—to what the mainstream pop audience wanted impacted media coverage of their work. In "The Delight of Words: The Elizabethan Sonneteers and American Country Lyricists" (2000), literary scholar Jill Tedford Jones casts Shania's music in still another light, drawing parallels between the structures and tropes of Elizabethan sonnets and those of contemporary country songs including Shania's.

Beyond such fleeting and varied considerations, Shania has remained largely absent from scholarly discourse. No journal articles or dissertations devoted exclusively to her let alone to questions of her global appeal exist. So conspicuous is this absence that musicologist Robin Elliott, Director of the Institute of Canadian Music, published an appeal for scholarly attention to her work in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (2006) under the auspices of a book review of an eminently unscholarly, fan-targeted biography.

General literature relevant to my research includes studies of fame, cultural consecration, and the media. In "Gender and Cultural Consecration in Popular Music" (2010), sociologists Vaughn Schmutz and Alison Faupel determine that gender impacts the likelihood that a pop musician will attain cultural legitimation, with females being less likely than their male counterparts to receive critical stamps of approval. In "From Paths of Glory to Celebrity Boulevards: Sociology of Paris Match Covers, 1949-2005"

(2010), Alain Chenu considers the sociology of the tabloid press, a matter certainly relevant to tabloid mainstays Céline and Shania. On a related note, cultural scholars Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi examine celebrities in terms of their role as emotional labourers in “ ‘A Trust Betrayed’: Celebrity and the Work of Emotion” (2010).

Methodologically speaking, Harris M. Berger’s “Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music” (2008) is particularly relevant to my research. In his phenomenological approach, Berger stresses the importance of being on a level playing field with one’s research participants so as to understand them “not as merely enacting cultural scripts, but as actively constituting their experiences.”<sup>3</sup> The lack of major precedent for research on the globalization of Céline’s and Shania’s music particularly affords the opportunity to do that. A phenomenological approach encourages one to engage with the production and reception of the music in a way more drastic than gnostic. Without texts to provide prefabricated explanations, one embarks on the research with fewer preconceptions.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, engaging in ethnography of any sort as part of a popular music study helps to fill a longtime gap in ethnomusicological research. As David B. Pruett points out in “When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Towards an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S.” (2011), popular music scholarship has long been a domain of armchair ethnography or, in technical terms, “macro-analysis of the system of popular music that includes complex networks of production, dissemination, and

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<sup>3</sup> Harris M. Berger, “Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music: Ethnomusicology at the Juncture of Cultural Studies and Folklore,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives on Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

consumption.” While there is a palpable need for localized, ethnographic research on popular music above and beyond typical cultural studies approaches, few examples exist to date.<sup>5</sup>

### *Aesthetic Framework: Postmodernism*

Céline and Shania have crossed many geocultural borders on their paths to global superstardom. This much is reflected not just in their international sales figures but, self-reflexively, in their work itself. Aesthetically speaking, postmodernist themes of globalization and multiculturalism run through their work.

Shania’s recordings and music videos, for their part, speak strongly to a collapse of cultural realms via parody and pastiche. Beyond her genre-defying album *Up!*, Shania has incorporated global cultural influences in her music videos. For instance, her video for “The Woman in Me” features her sashaying through the streets of Cairo, riding a horse by pyramids, and even sailing down the Nile. In a similar vein, the video for “From This Moment On” shows Shania outfitted as an Indian bride complete with a bindi.

Céline’s oeuvre also displays an aesthetics of globalization. Beyond singing in multiple languages, Céline and her packagers self-consciously market her music to an international audience through music videos whose narratives are populated by characters of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Such an awareness of diverse audience demographics is evident in videos for “That’s The Way It Is” and “A New Day Has Come.”

Collaborations with international musicians further underscore Dion’s position as an artist whose work aesthetically fuses diverse cultures just as it evidently appeals to those

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<sup>5</sup> David B. Pruett, “When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Towards an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S.,” *Ethnomusicology* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 3.

of diverse cultures. Her international collaborators include Japanese violinist Taro Hakase, who is featured on her Japanese hit single “To Love You More,” and French singer-songwriter Jean-Jacques Goldman, who wrote and produced her signature French-language song “Pour que tu m’aimes encore.”

### *Research Methods*

I attended a sampling of live performances by Céline and Shania in June and December 2012, respectively. Appropriately enough, both Céline and Shania are currently signed on for residency shows at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, a postmodernist locale in its own right with parodies of Venetian canals, Egyptian pyramids, and the Eiffel Tower. At these shows, I examined audience demographics and viewing practices in relation to the cultural identities, iconographies, and music traditions portrayed onstage through aspects of performance practice, *mise-en-scène*, and the music itself. I additionally considered how Las Vegas reflects who Céline and Shania are as artists and functions as a subtext to their shows. Las Vegas is a global tourist destination designed to offer something for everyone; similarly, Céline and Shania are global superstars who entertain many different music listeners in many different ways.

I also conducted virtual ethnography on Céline’s and Shania’s online fan clubs in order to formulate an understanding of the global culture consuming the two superstars’ products. On the clubs’ online forums, I invited fans to participate in an interview survey as a means of gleaning a sense of who is listening to Céline and Shania and how the two singers are perceived around the world. All respondents’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

My position in both fields—the Las Vegas shows and the online fan clubs—was that of an outsider. I had never before attended a Céline or Shania concert, nor had I ever visited their online fan clubs. I only had a passing sense of their music and public personae. But I became interested in Céline’s commercial success as I saw headline after headline declaring that she had reinvented the music scene in Las Vegas with her initial Caesars Palace residency show. That show, *A New Day...*, became one of the most profitable shows in music history and inspired other international pop stars including Shania to follow in her footsteps. I further became interested in mapping out how Céline and Shania became so popular as to be able to draw the world to them as tourist attractions of sorts in Vegas.

Indeed, to sustain such large-scale residency shows, a musician must be on par with former residents like Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra in terms of popularity and iconic status. Such cultural saturation is a phenomenon more often mythologized and demonized than scrutinized. So to complement my ethnographic research in Las Vegas and online fan communities, I interviewed critics, popular music scholars, and music industry executives as a means of gleaning insight into the mechanisms behind it.

*Theoretical Framework: A Fluid Model of Global Superstardom*

Sociologist John Urry identifies three “social topographies” of space: region, network, and fluids. These topographies are the basis for three different models of globalization.<sup>6</sup> Each of these models, in turn, presents a paradigm for understanding the phenomenon of global superstardom.

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<sup>6</sup> John Urry (2000), cited in John Hannigan, “Culture, Globalization, and Social Cohesion: Towards a De-territorialized, Global Fluids Model,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2 (2002): 277-78.



As sociologist John Hannigan explains, the regional model of globalization involves considering it “as the replacing of one region (the bounded, nation-state society of the ‘West’) with another (that of the global economy and culture).” The result is an “ ‘intra-regional competition’ in which the larger global region defeats the smaller societal region.”<sup>7</sup> According to this model, one could understand Céline and Shania as cultural conquistadors, but that implies a lack of able resistance when in fact many music listeners and critics do resist them.

The network model casts globalization as the ultimate success of global corporations like Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Sony. Such corporations “ensure that more or less the same product is delivered in more or less the same manner in every nation in which the enterprise operates.”<sup>8</sup> One could understand Céline and Shania as corporations in this way, distributing their standardized music to the global masses, but that would not be entirely accurate insofar as their music is presented differently to different geocultural audiences.

The fluids model conceives of globalization “as taking the shape of global fluids which move chaotically across regions in strikingly faster and unpredictable shapes.”<sup>9</sup> While global regions and networks allegedly homogenize, global fluids heterogenize.<sup>10</sup> I approach Céline and Shania from a global fluids perspective. Through this lens, they are neither standardized products nor organic artists, and are neither entirely guilty nor entirely innocent in their global domination.

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<sup>7</sup> Urry (2000), cited in Hannigan, 278-79.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Hannigan, 279.

As Hannigan observes, there are indeed “good” and “bad” characters in typical globalization narratives:

In the globalization debate, local and national regions are generally thought to be the “good” characters in contemporary cultural life. This reflects our belief that music, art, and literature that bubbles up from geographic proximity and shared historical experience must be superior to that which is portable and de-contextualized. For example, “East Coast” music such as that coming out of Cape Breton Island is celebrated in Canada as being genuine and worthy of support at the same time as global pop superstars such as Celine Dion and Shania Twain are sometimes criticized on the grounds that their music is too generic.<sup>11</sup>

In a global fluids model, though, Céline and Shania are neither entirely good nor entirely bad, and my research supports this fluid position. Fans’, critics’, and music executives’ interpretations of these stars and their roles in culture are far from fixed, so our understanding of them should reflect that.

As a result of their fluid positions within global culture, each chapter of my thesis presents multiple, sometimes conflicting frameworks for understanding Céline and Shania. Their sheer mystique as superstars renders them unsuitable to linear analysis. Indeed, so vast is their reach that it would be impossible to quantify or even adequately qualify their impact on society. A circular structure reflects the inherent polysemy and polyvalence of these divisive public figures. Céline and Shania play many different characters onstage and to the press, so it follows that my research illuminates many different aspects of them that point more to questions than to conclusions.

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<sup>11</sup> Hannigan, 279.

A circular structure also allows for full presentation of the diversity of perspectives I uncovered over the course of my research from fans, music executives, critics, and scholars. It acknowledges the existence of a plurality of truths rather than reinforcing false notions of a singular truth. As Berger observes, notions that “there is only a one local view of things, a view that is identical across ‘others,’ produced by culture rather than agents, different from ‘our’ own, and ultimately fully discoverable by the all-knowing ethnographer” deny the heterogeneity of cultures under study.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, a circular rather than linear approach to considering Céline and Shania allows readers to make up their own minds about who these stars are and what the significance of their music might be.

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<sup>12</sup> Berger, 70.

## I. Who is Céline Dion?

### *A Working-Class Diva*

From a critical perspective, Céline is a diva in the sense of drugstore chocolates that are labeled “fine European.” Her music is working-class fare with an elegant twist, offering an accessible notion of high culture to the masses. In Carl Wilson’s words, hers is “an aspirational music the way that hip-hop can be,” without the grit. Céline’s audience gets to experience luxury through her, specifically “the luxury item that is her voice, with its ornamental melisma and plush velvet autotuning and its many octaves like the wings of a mansion.”<sup>13</sup>

As Wilson points out, for this reason, Céline blends in perfectly with the cultural landscape of Las Vegas, where she has performed two residency shows since 2003. She is an emblem of the very dream that Vegas offers to gamblers: “You go to this strike-it-rich spot and there is Celine, for whom luck’s clearly been a lady, spewing out golden notes for you to catch like coins streaming out of a jackpot slot machine.”<sup>14</sup>

More essentially, Céline’s position as a diva for the masses reflects her beginnings as the youngest in a poor Francophone family of fourteen children in the working-class Montreal suburb of Charlemagne. The apparent “hunger for the deluxe” underlying everything she does finds a certain logic when interpreted through this lens.<sup>15</sup>

The brand of elegance and upward mobility that Céline represents, though, is frankly old-fashioned. As Wilson puts it, “With her synthesized strings and her genuine

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<sup>13</sup> Carl Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz: Poptimism vs. the Guilty Displeasure,” in *Pop When the World Falls Apart: Music in the Shadow of Doubt*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 304.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 303.

pearls, she aspires to the highbrow culture of a half-century ago.” Who, then, is Céline singing for? Contemporary upper-class sensibilities are more modernist. And the contemporary middle class is intent upon assuming pretensions diametrically opposed to Céline’s classiness, preferring a “masquerade of downward mobility in trucker caps and ironic moustaches.”<sup>16</sup>

In theory, Céline’s audience falls between the cracks, and statistically this holds true. A 2005-2006 market research study conducted by the New York-based NPD Group on behalf of Céline’s label, Sony, reveals the extent to which her American fans are not representative of average American music consumers. They are mostly older: few are teenagers, while nearly half are over fifty. They frequently first encountered Céline via television and typically buy her albums at big-box discounters. Many live in flyover states and are low-income, with disproportionate numbers of fans falling into the lowest (under \$25,000) and next-lowest income brackets. They are also more likely to be neither black nor white than the average music buyer, reflecting Céline’s global reach.<sup>17</sup>

#### *An Anti-Diva*

Céline is the face and voice of an empire constructed by her husband-manager René Angélil, as she herself frequently acknowledges. When speaking of her many successes, she always uses the pronoun ‘we’ rather than ‘I,’ thereby recognizing the contributions of everyone from her husband to her producers to her stylists to her fans and beyond.<sup>18</sup> For Wilson, the openly acknowledged collective effort behind Céline’s superstardom speaks to French Québec’s communalist sensibilities:

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 305.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 101-2.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 304.

She came up through the province's star system, a huge stock of household names utterly unknown elsewhere, a system actively promoted by cultural leaders there as an exercise in collective identity building, after the 1960s Quiet Revolution, in which Quebecers threw off what they saw as the colonialism of both English Canada and the Catholic Church.

Québec thus has a "collective stake" in Céline, just as black America has a stake in black American stars. Céline's cultural roots, Wilson argues, "set the mold for her relationship to audiences: my success is yours."<sup>19</sup>

The perspective of a teenaged female fan from Québec supports Wilson's argument. In her words, "Céline has always been part of my life in a way since I'm from Québec." Her mother is a longtime fan and passed on a love of Céline to her daughter, who says that becoming a fan "came very naturally." She appreciates that while Céline is "an international star, she is still true to herself, true to her roots, humble." Of her trip to Vegas to see Céline's show, she writes, "It meant so much to me to be there in Vegas for her. I was there with my Québec flag and I remember that when she saw me, she winked. I think that it's important that people from her home come to support her."<sup>20</sup> Céline's fans very profoundly feel they are part of her success, and vice versa.

The continuity between Céline and her fans was even visualized as part of her first Vegas show, *A New Day*.... As Wilson describes in his account of the Cirque du Soleil-inspired spectacle, before the show begins,

the backdrop is a vast gilded picture frame, within which is a real-time live video of you the audience finding your seats. As show time nears, the camera begins

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 304.

<sup>20</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 17, 2012.

zooming in on selected spectators, creating a repeated comic pantomime in which you see people realize they're being projected several stories high, shrink from the camera or mug for it—there are teenage girls, a family in which the father is asleep, some drunk gamblers, and finally a couple still dressed in their wedding outfits. And then the frame expands, and shatters into a hundred shards of light, which all spin down and converge on Celine herself, revealed poised on a sweeping red staircase.<sup>21</sup>

Even when it comes to her voice, Céline is more than content to play a communal rather than starring role. Her job, she feels, is just to sing her songs. She wants to be a part of listeners' lives through her music, but hopes never to “disturb” or “interrupt” them.<sup>22</sup> As Wilson remarks, she “musically incarnates the masochistic devotion of the woman who takes care of everybody but herself.”<sup>23</sup> Or as a female fan from New York puts it, Céline represents an “anti-feminist fantasy—this (sometimes alluring) idea that if a woman is always sweet and kind and tries to please, she will be loved and protected and cared for.” At a practical level, the fan notes, Céline “is able to always be so sweet and nice because Rene and their whole team make the tough choices; make sure she's surrounded with the right people; speak out for her and protect her when needed.”<sup>24</sup>

Chuck Taylor, formerly of *Billboard* magazine and the author of seven cover stories on Céline, upholds this idea that Céline's husband-manager provides a barrier which has prevented her from becoming the stereotypical demanding, mysterious, and dramatic diva:

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 304.

<sup>22</sup> Céline Dion, quoted in Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 306.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 306.

<sup>24</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 18, 2012.

Honestly I think that Celine’s relationship with her husband and manager Rene Angelil has allowed her to maintain a purity that many lose along the way... like Whitney Houston. Rene is her filter—and allows Celine to focus on the music, the singing (and of course, now, their family). As a result, she has not grown bitter of the vulgar side of the music business... it’s far from innocence... Celine knows exactly what she is doing... but at the same time, it has kept her from constantly being on guard and eventually retreating from sharing so much of her life with the public.<sup>25</sup>

### *A Celebrity*

Wilson brands Céline “a dull celebrity, aside from her creepy royal wedding” to René.<sup>26</sup> But as Line Grenier points out, this is far from true, particularly when it comes to the Québécois press. Indeed, Wilson’s assessment largely seems to reflect the type of media that he consumes as an Anglophone, Toronto-based *Globe and Mail* editor. In Québec, Céline’s “every career move and personal life decision has triggered heated debates and long-lasting rumours” that she is anorexic, gay, and so forth.<sup>27</sup>

In 2001, for instance, a writer for Québec’s *Allo-Vedette* magazine asserted that Céline and René had paid “\$5,000 to rent out the swimming pool of Caesars Palace in Las Vegas so she could sunbathe topless and he could skinny-dip unmolested.” The couple denied the accusation and made efforts to sue the magazine for defamation.<sup>28</sup> In 2002, a woman also sued René for allegedly raping her at a Las Vegas hotel, igniting a

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<sup>25</sup> Chuck Taylor, e-mail interview, July 4, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 300.

<sup>27</sup> Line Grenier, “Global Pop On the Move: The Fame of Superstar Céline Dion Within, Outside, and Across Quebec,” *Australian Canadian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2001): 31.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Reiter, “Celine Dion’s Naked Rage,” *Salon*, August 22, 2001, [http://www.salon.com/2001/08/22/npwed\\_56/](http://www.salon.com/2001/08/22/npwed_56/) (accessed March 12, 2013).



media firestorm. The charge against him was ultimately dropped with the accuser being charged with extortion.<sup>29</sup> On the flipside, Céline uses tabloids to great effect to promote herself in the light in which she wants to be seen. Over the years, she has regularly granted interviews and photo shoots to tabloids to publicize such personal matters as her fertility struggles and family life.

Sociologist Alain Chenu argues that “Interest in celebrities’ private lives is nothing more than the main feature of a vast division of labor that enables the magazine press to survive in a media landscape where news first reaches the public by television, radio and now the internet.” In other words, since the likes of Grammy and Academy Awards results are first announced in non-print media, magazines need to offer new twists on celebrity stories in order to attract readers. So it follows that coverage of celebrities in magazines focuses on “roles that fall outside their main area of expertise,” particularly widely relatable ones like “parent,” “sick person,” and “lover.”<sup>30</sup>

Publicization of celebrities’ private lives does not just keep print media alive, though. Celebrities like Céline benefit too. For instance, a series of 2010-2011 cover stories in tabloids like *Hello! Canada* and *People* feature interviews with Céline about her desire for more children, struggles to conceive, and eventual joy at the birth of her twins<sup>31</sup>—all life events that many people can relate to. Even at a time when she was not active as a musician, having wrapped up her first Las Vegas residency show and her subsequent world tour, Céline was able to keep her empire running by opening up her

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<sup>29</sup> “Dion Husband Rape Charge Dropped,” *BBC News Online*, January 24, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2690319.stm> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Alain Chenu, “From Paths of Glory to Celebrity Boulevards: Sociology of Paris Match Covers, 1949-2005,” *Revue française de sociologie* 51, no. 5 (2010): 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> See *People*, February 22, 2010; *Hello! Canada*, June 14, 2010; *Hello! Canada*, November 1, 2010; *Hello! Canada*, November 8, 2010.

personal life to the press.

*A Mother, Wife, Daughter, and Sister*

In fact, the most striking finding I uncovered over the course of my research on Céline was the extent to which her publicized family roles are meaningful components of her career. Countless fans I interviewed point to this element of Céline's public character as being among the foremost qualities that make her appealing to them.

In response to my question about what she likes most about Céline, Anne, a fan in her fifties from South Africa, simply replied: "Her love for her children. As a mother myself, I can relate to her love for her children and will do anything for my children."<sup>32</sup> Lisa, a much younger fan from Australia, echoes this sentiment, writing admiringly of how Céline is not just "a powerful voice" but also "a loving mother and wife."<sup>33</sup> Another young female fan from New York writes that she "love[s] what a good wife, mother, daughter, and sister [Céline] is." For this fan, "knowing what an extraordinary woman she is makes her voice sound even more beautiful."<sup>34</sup> This recognition and admiration of Céline in her gendered family roles crosses not only age but also gender divides. Ben, a young male fan from New Jersey, "love[s] that she is a family person, doesn't get involved in crazy Hollywood stuff, and just enjoys her life—it's refreshing."<sup>35</sup>

So profoundly appealing is Céline's family woman persona that numerous fans indicate that of all the images of Céline in circulation, those of her with family members—and in particular her children—are their favourite. One such fan, a teenaged female from Québec, even writes of how thrilled she is that Céline is performing in

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<sup>32</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 29, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 18, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 19, 2012.

Vegas because it affords her a stable family life.<sup>36</sup> Her remarkable awareness of and concern for Céline's family life is, I found, actually representative of the perspective of the fan base at large.

### *A Cultural Chameleon*

According to a *Reader's Digest* piece entitled the *Céline Dion vs. Celine Dion Faceoff*, Dion has two distinct linguistic and cultural identities. Céline was born in 1968, and Celine in 1990. Céline has released 14 albums; Celine, 10. Céline's fan base is in Québec and France, whereas Celine commands "the universe." Céline's signature song is "Pour que tu m'aimes encore," while Celine's is "My Heart Will Go On." Céline's signature move is "Looking skyward, chest thump," where Celine's is "Chest thump, leg lunge." Céline's talk show "best friend" is Julie Snyder; Celine's is Oprah. Politically, Céline keeps quiet on the topic of sovereignty, while Celine tears up about Hurricane Katrina. Céline's "big gig" was a free show on the Plains of Abraham in Québec City to commemorate the city's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2008, while Celine's is a Vegas show.<sup>37</sup>

These journalistic interpretations of Céline's dual career give a tangible sense of the extent to which she is an artist who presents herself differently according to the cultural context. But Céline is much more chameleonic than even this magazine piece makes her out to be. As Erin Hurley observes in *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion*, she "loans herself / her image out to any number of

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<sup>36</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 17, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> "The Céline Dion vs. Celine Dion Faceoff," *Reader's Digest*, <http://www.readersdigest.ca/magazine/rd-recommends/celine-dion-vs-celine-dion-faceoff> (accessed March 12, 2013).

discourses” as it suits her enterprise.<sup>38</sup> Remarkably, her multiple identities manage not to entirely call each other into question. They are conflicting and seamless at the same time, like the pieces that make up a mosaic. The mosaic-like construction of Céline’s public persona ensures that many diverse people are able to find something to like about her.

On one hand, according to sociologist Frédéric Demers, Céline is the model Québécois star: “In her modest origins, through her numerous reminders of her Quebec-ness, Céline Dion has stayed loyal to the land, to family, to a more traditional definition of identity.”<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Hurley notes, Céline’s public persona is that of a *mère de famille à la québécoise*. She speaks incessantly of her children to the press and maintains her Québécois accent even when in France, thus prioritizing her family and cultural heritage above other matters. When viewed through this lens, “Dion’s story reprises the narrative contours of a traditional notion of *canayenété* rooted in *la survivance*’s cultural and biological reproductions.”<sup>40</sup> As Demers notes, Céline also “actively participates in the redefinition of Québécois identity by personifying the archetype of the modern Self—capable, entrepreneurial, profitable, hardworking, productive.”<sup>41</sup>

Yet coexisting alongside Céline’s Québécois identity are a range of other identities, for instance her broader identity as a Canadian national icon. As David Young explains in “Céline Dion, National Unity, and the English-Language Press in Canada,” the Anglophone press tends to cast her 1991-1992 national tour as a symbol of Canadian unity. This is in part because the tour came after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord

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<sup>38</sup> Erin Hurley, *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 144.

<sup>39</sup> Frédéric Demers (1999), quoted in Hurley, 142-43.

<sup>40</sup> Hurley, 143.

<sup>41</sup> Frédéric Demers (1999), quoted in Hurley, 142-43.

which strove to include Québec in the Canadian constitution but instead motivated the 1995 Québec referendum on sovereignty.<sup>42</sup>

In 1990, Céline refused a Félix award for Anglophone Artist of the Year from the *Association québécoise de l'industrie du disque, du spectacle et de la vidéo* (ADISQ) on live television, on the grounds that she was in her view first and foremost a Francophone artist. Nonetheless, since then, Céline has frequently been branded “a ‘vendue’ to Anglophone/U.S. interests” as her English-language music has become her main priority. As Hurley points out, she is in this sense “a model United States immigrant who is willingly assimilated, joyously participating in the American Dream, and spreading its consumerist gospel of hope and happiness through her ever-expanding repertoire of branded products,”<sup>43</sup> which range from perfumes to sunglasses to champagne flutes.

Céline’s American brand coalesces perfectly with that of Oprah Winfrey, another deified but extensively commercialized public figure.<sup>44</sup> Céline has indeed collaborated extensively with Oprah both in terms of appearances on her talk show and a documentary, *Celine: 3 Boys and a New Show* (2011), for the OWN network. But ultimately, Hurley observes, Céline’s “availability to any number of national, corporate, or musical meanings” complicates any and all metaphorical interpretations of her persona.<sup>45</sup>

### *Human*

The word “human” came up as a descriptor of Céline many times in the thirty-five interviews I conducted with fans. Céline, it seems, is able to connect with her audience at

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<sup>42</sup> David Young (2001), cited in Hurley, 143.

<sup>43</sup> Hurley, 143.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 145.

a very personal level, so much so that fans feel she is just like them, even while recognizing that she exists in a world apart from them. As Andrea, a fan from Florida, puts it, “she’s relatable, yet so grandiose.”<sup>46</sup> And according to Maria from Israel, she is “funny, dramatic and very much human and humble.”<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth from London feels the same way, writing: “Yes, I love her voice too but what makes me respect her even more is how humble and down to earth she is ... she has not ‘changed’ as other celebrities have.”<sup>48</sup> As a female fan from Québec summarizes, “Céline is very human.”<sup>49</sup>

Chuck Taylor, who has interviewed Céline extensively over the years, agrees. In his words, she is “dear, emotional, confessional and funny as hell.” He recalls the experience of having dinner with her, along with her husband and Sony management, before her 1998 VH-1 *Divas Live* concert:

It was the first time we’d been face to face after numerous phoners and frankly, I was beside myself—nervous and about to break into a sweat. Celine sat down beside me at the table, said, “How are you doing, honey?” and I felt like I was out with a friend. Before the evening finished, everyone at the table was singing TV theme songs. And when Celine dipped her fork in my plate to sample my mashed potatoes, I felt like I’d experienced a religious moment!

Taylor also describes visiting Céline at her home to conduct the first interview with the star after her career hiatus in the early 2000s:

We sat in her dining room and cried together as she spoke about 9/11... and she recounted her own fear and anger... There is no doubt that Celine Dion feels all

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<sup>46</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, July 20, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 23, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 17, 2012.

things so deeply to the core of her being. In public I have never seen her brush off a single fan. She came from a simple background and never forgets who is responsible for her fame. So I have seen her laugh, cry, and say what's on her mind with few filters... she is the real deal.<sup>50</sup>

There is, however, inevitably some design behind Céline's public humanity. Taylor acknowledges that he is certain she is aware of the extent to which "talking about difficulties getting pregnant, her trials here and there, make her more relatable to her audience." The net effect of Céline's efforts to be an open book vis-à-vis her fans is that "Everybody who listens feels they have a little piece of Celine—that they somehow know her. That's a magic few can convey over the long haul, but Celine continues to... even when reporters ask her the same damn five questions over and over and over... A smile, a candid response and the world embraces that honesty."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Taylor, e-mail interview.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## II. Who is Shania Twain?

### *A Working-Class Diva*

In a country crossover answer to Céline’s supersized vocals, Shania is a two-for-one musical special. She is part country songstress, part pop diva, and will often let you choose who you want her to be insofar as all of her four best-selling albums were released in more than one version. Regarding *Up!*—which was released in three versions with buyers receiving two for the price of one—the star herself proclaimed that “if you expect people not to steal your stuff, you better give them a good deal.”<sup>52</sup> Fans have anointed her “The Real Deal,”<sup>53</sup> a designation that appears to hold true in both the humanistic and economic sense.

The bang for your buck quality of Shania’s music has its roots in her upbringings in Timmins, Ontario, where she emerged from a “rural, working-poor and largely Native American community.”<sup>54</sup> Like Céline, she is a rags-to-riches star. And like Céline’s fans, Shania’s fans skew low-income: more than half of the participants in a fan-conducted 2000 study of Shania’s online fan community identified themselves as earning less than \$20,000 per year. Unlike the case of Céline, though, this figure perhaps accounts for Shania’s significant young audience, with more than half of the fans surveyed being under 30.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Chris Nelson, “A Marketing Surprise in Shania Twain’s New CD,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> E-mail interview with a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Aaron A. Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What? O Brother, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 186.

<sup>55</sup> FV, “Shania’s Fan Base and Its Marketing Potentials: A Statistical Analysis of Shania Twain’s Fan Community Based on an Online Survey Posted at



According to sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal, Shania's rise from rags to riches represents the typical socioeconomic trajectory of a commercial country star. In their words, "Commercial country artists generally come from working-class backgrounds and exemplify the contemporary dilemmas of economic wealth, unrootedness, and moral dis-ease." Shania has indeed "lived" country in contrast to many of her counterparts in alternative country. Alt-country is a purportedly more authentic sub-genre of country music than Shania's mainstream country-pop, but ironically its performers are primarily of middle-class origins. Unlike Shania, alt-country singers imagine "the bygone ways of the impoverished, villainous, and defiant" from a distanced, romantic point of view.<sup>56</sup>

The result of Shania's intimacy with the gritty realities behind country music's pastoral veneer is that despite her superstar status she is not altogether unlike a workaday country singer, just as Céline is in many ways not unlike a Québécois *chansonnier*. Aaron Fox illustrates as much through a comparison of Shania and Randy Meyer, a barroom singer virtually unknown outside of his working-class town of Lockhart, Texas. At the surface level, Meyer's career trajectory may seem diametrically opposed to that of multiplatinum star Shania. Despite being "a technically masterful singer, and a charismatic stage performer, Meyer made only a few independent recordings in the 1970s, and remained an obscure local artist throughout his life." But a similar commitment to articulating working-class values holds true in the case of both musicians,

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www.everythingshania.com," Shania Twain North American Online Fan Club, July 9, 2000, <http://www.shaniafans.com/surveyresults.htm> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal, "Alternative Country: Origins, Music, World-view, Fans, and Taste in Genre Formation," *Popular Music and Society* 25, no. 1 (2001): 234.

inverted as their articulations may be in terms of both gender and scale.<sup>57</sup>

As Fox observes, both grew up in poverty, Meyer “as one of six children of a journeyman carpenter” and Shania “as the adopted daughter of an Ojibway Indian father in rural Ontario.” Meyer, for his part, used his musical talent as a platform from which to convey

the cultural values of the blue-collar urban fringe community in which he was raised, singing commercial “hard” country (by artists such as Merle Haggard) in small bars for most of his life. The persona he cultivated was aggressively masculine, fiercely independent, and intensely sentimental.<sup>58</sup>

While Meyer expressed working-class masculinity to his Southern Texas working-class audience in VFW halls and honky-tonks, Shania’s arena-sized music and persona have brought working-class feminism to the masses. As Fox describes,

The persona she embodies is aggressively feminine ... but this is a working-class feminism that has made her spectacularly popular not only as a pinup idol for men but as a fantasy role model for millions of working-class American girls (and sometimes dismissed as ‘belly button feminism’ by her critics).<sup>59</sup>

Shania illustrates her working-class brand of feminism when she sings of her ideal love interest in “Any Man of Mine”:

Well any man of mine better disagree  
When I say another woman’s lookin’ better than me  
And when I cook him dinner and I burn it black

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<sup>57</sup> Fox, “ ‘Alternative’ to What?” 186.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

He better say, mm, I like it like that yeah

Feminist Shania is thus still a woman in the kitchen cooking dinner, while masculine Meyer is implicitly out hard at work. To use Merle Haggard's nostalgic characterizations of men and women in his 1982 hit "Are the Good Times Really Over (I Wish a Buck Was Still Silver)," Meyer's male persona "could still work and still would" while Shania's female persona "could still cook and still would," at least to some degree. The very title of one of Shania's earliest hits, "The Woman in Me (Needs the Man in You)," bluntly states her male dependency, something central to her star persona and the production of her music alike.

Moreover, both Shania and Meyer not only speak for but also embody the working class in their performances. Paralleling the working-class vignettes they narrate in their repertoire, both Shania and Meyer exhibit "an entirely unironic *effort* in their performances, a commitment to values of discipline, self-denial, religiosity, convention, and craft." Shania and Meyer thereby tacitly reject "the canonical bourgeois affect identified by Bourdieu as *ease*, an aesthetic stance that announces 'objective distance from necessity and those trapped within it.'" <sup>60</sup> In Shania's case, effort is sometimes even painfully at the fore, as in her Oprah Winfrey Network docu-series *Why Not? with Shania Twain* in which she works on-camera to regain her voice and confidence in the wake of her high-profile divorce.

However, as Fox explains, the kinds of effort exhibited by Shania and Meyer are distinct insofar as they represent opposite sociolinguistic phenomena: hers, hypercorrection, and his, covert prestige. Practically speaking, hypercorrection means

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<sup>60</sup> Fox, " 'Alternative' to What?" 187.

that Twain's "visible efforts are directed too obviously to upward mobility, self-regulation, and a concern with what one's social betters might stigmatize." Her working-class femininity thus "earns her the kind of bourgeois scorn reserved for working-class women who don't realize they are making fools of themselves."<sup>61</sup> Country singer Steve Earle, the son of an air traffic controller (and thus middle-class by birth), exhibits this kind of top-down criticism in his characterization of Shania as "the highest paid lap dancer in Nashville."<sup>62</sup>

Conversely, Meyer's covert prestige centers around his "cultivated refusal to engage with any bourgeois norms of bodily disposition, language, or ideology that defines traditional working-class ideas of masculinity." Like Shania's working-class femininity, though, Meyer's "working-class masculinity has also been the object of bourgeois scorn in American culture, in the figure of the hard-drinking, racist, inelegant 'redneck.'" For Fox, the fact that Meyer "would reject Shania Twain as an artist" and that Shania in turn would regard Meyer as "a relic of her own kind of past" illuminates the extent to which both musicians' work is politically entrenched in working-class identity issues, most unavoidably gender issues.<sup>63</sup>

#### *Unintellectual*

Belly button-wary feminists and the working class-wary bourgeoisie are far from Shania's sole detractors. No doubt reflecting her working-class position as an artist, Shania has been all but shut out by academia. Robin Elliott dramatically underscores as much in a book review for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. He barley discusses the

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<sup>61</sup> Fox, " 'Alternative' to What?" 187.

<sup>62</sup> Steve Earle, quoted in Fox, " 'Alternative' to What?" 187.

<sup>63</sup> Fox, " 'Alternative' to What?" 187-88.

fan-targeted unauthorized biography, Jim Brown's *Shania: Up and Away* (2004), purportedly under review. He simply remarks that "there is little reason to recommend this book" and points readers to Robin Eggar's *Shania Twain: The Biography* (2002) as the most credible source for information about the star in the face of a lack of academic sources.<sup>64</sup> Elliott's seemingly bizarre decision to review Brown's eminently unscholarly book in a scholarly forum is clearly tactical. Instead of providing an in-depth review enumerating the faults of Brown's book, Elliott uses the bulk of his space to lament the lack of scholarly attention to Shania. The resulting article serves as a strategic call to action in the vein of Carl Wilson's call for greater critical consideration of Céline.

Shania's absence from dissertations and journal articles is, Elliott insists, not for a lack of compelling research questions generated by her. He even devotes a lengthy paragraph of his review to listing potential research topics suggested by Shania's life and career. He is so eager in his quest to draw attention to this neglected figure that he all but hands the reader a do-it-yourself guide to researching her:

Performativity and identity issues abound—e.g., how does the image of Shania Twain as projected in media sources and her song lyrics relate to the 'real' Eillean Edwards? (Shania Twain is her stage name, with an assumed first name and the surname from her Ojibwe stepfather, who also adopted her; Eillean Edwards is her birth name.) Other potential topics for study might include an analysis of how the gender images implicit in her song lyrics compare to those explicitly portrayed in her music videos; an examination of country and pop influences in her music and how this is reflected in her reception as a 'rebel' or 'mainstream' artist within

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<sup>64</sup> Robin Elliott, review of *Shania Twain: Up and Away*, by Jim Brown, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 412-13.

different musical communities; a comparison of the role that Canadian allegiances, influences, and contexts (e.g., Anne Murray, the Canadian Country Music Association, the CRTC) have played in her career versus US ones (e.g., Dolly Parton, the Country Music Association, CMT); and the artistic, economic, and demographic implications of her ongoing and carefully crafted exploitation of market segmentation (her albums *Come on Over* and *Up!* were released in three different versions to appeal to different musical communities).

Elliott further proposes that scholarly neglect of Shania could in and of itself be a fruitful area of inquiry,<sup>65</sup> in the vein of Carl Wilson investigating critics' overwhelming dislike of Céline.

In a sociopolitically aware academic sphere where books treating supposedly lowbrow topics such as Aaron Fox's *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (which considers Randy Meyer but, unlike the previously mentioned article, does not consider Shania) are used as university course textbooks, one wonders why Shania still remains essentially shut out of the academy. I have not once heard Shania's name—or, for that matter, Céline's—mentioned in the classroom. Why is a little-known working-class male country singer an appropriate subject for scholarly investigation where a well-known working-class female country singer is not? More than once over the course of my research, music industry and academic interviewees queried me with remarks like “That's *it?*” when I described my research topic to them. Their queries are innocuous enough in light of the widespread lack of critical attention to both Céline and Shania, but quite ironic in light of the fact that they essentially owe Céline,

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<sup>65</sup> Elliott, 412.

Shania, and others like them their careers.

*Not a Christian, Not from Nashville, and Not a Meat-Eater*

Shania's lifestyle is unconventional for a country singer. She is not Christian, she lives in Switzerland, and she is a vegetarian. Being vegetarian may seem less significant than her not being Christian and not living in Nashville. But in the context of country music it is far from a trivial matter. In 1990, the career of another Canadian country music star, Albertan k.d. lang, was in danger after she unsettled the country establishment "by making an advertisement that criticized meat-production processes and promoted vegetarianism. To a musical world that is characterized by a meat-eating culture and resonates with cowboy images, this was a serious transgression." In the fallout, lang's music was removed from radio airplay in beef-producing areas like Alberta and Nebraska and castigated in newspapers. Offended country music listeners returned her recordings and sent more than a thousand critical letters to her record label. The furor died down, though, as lang repositioned herself as more of a mainstream singer without a fixed genre affiliation to country music.<sup>66</sup>

Before one of Shania's Colosseum shows, a female fan in her forties told me that Shania's vegetarianism is actually one of the foremost qualities she admires in the star. That fans appreciate Shania's vegetarianism is testament to the extent to which she—like lang as well as another openly vegetarian country-pop star, Carrie Underwood—is not a pure country star in the traditional sense. Instead of wholly investing herself in the conventional country aesthetic and lifestyle, Shania embraces other cultural ideas and infuses herself and her music with them. Her vegetarianism, indeed, began when she took

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<sup>66</sup> Gill Valentine, "Creating Transgressive Space: The Music of kd lang," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 4 (1995): 475.

up Sant Mat, an Eastern mystical religion that calls for a meat-free diet.

### *A Tourist Attraction*

While few monuments to Céline beyond a street name exist in her hometown, Shania was for many years a bricks-and-mortar tourist attraction in hers. The Shania Twain Centre in Timmins, Ontario was established in 2001. It was eventually closed in 2013 to make way for a mining project. Tracy Hautanen, the Centre's manager since its inception, explains how and why the Centre was established in the first place:

When her career was peaking in the nineties, the City of Timmins approached Shania and asked if they could create a museum in her name because they thought that would be a good tourist draw. Many tourists were coming there asking about Shania and they had nothing to offer them. Shania agreed to assist in any way she could by way of lending clothing and other articles so there would always be something for Timmins to showcase. Timmins received federal, provincial, and municipal funding to build the Centre.<sup>67</sup>

At its peak, the museum featured a wide array of Shania memorabilia including photographs, handwritten lyrics, costumes, and even a tour bus. It drew thousands of visitors each year, though not ever nearing its projected 50,000 annual visitors.

The Centre at first drew mostly what Hautanen describes as “very passionate fans.” They came from around the world to attend annual fan conventions held there. Over time, the Centre also attracted people in town for work or family visits who would come not so much because they were major fans but because of the beautiful building and

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<sup>67</sup> Tracy Hautanen, telephone interview, August 9, 2012.



the compelling story told within.<sup>68</sup> Evidently, there was once a real demand for some kind of site in Timmins dedicated to Shania. As the economy sank and Twain's career cooled off, however, so did visitation numbers. In 2012, the Centre was significantly scaled back as the City of Timmins considered selling the site to a mining corporation, and plans were made for many of the items on display to be relocated to promote Shania Kids Can charity for instance at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

Since Timmins residents were paying taxes to support the Centre's operating costs, the Centre was politically unpopular. Locals disliked the idea that they were bankrolling the shrine of an offshore multimillionaire.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, locals have a bit of a love-hate relationship with Shania. One Timmins native responds to my interest in her being from Shania's hometown with a lamenting, "But she's never there." On the flipside, Hautanen speaks admiringly of how Shania "always promotes her hometown" and has always supported the Centre by both generously donating items and being understanding of whatever the City wanted to do with it, even if that meant downsizing her exhibit or closing the Centre altogether.<sup>70</sup>

Guy Lamarche, Manger of Tourism, Events, and Communication for the City of Timmins, points out that the Shania Twain Centre was modeled after successful attractions in Tennessee based on Dolly Parton (Dollywood, located in Pigeon Forge) and Elvis Presley (Graceland, located in Memphis). It was also inspired by Canadian country singer Anne Murray's successful Springhill, Nova Scotia attraction.<sup>71</sup> Why did the Shania Twain Centre fail where these other comparable attractions have succeeded?

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<sup>68</sup> Hautanen, telephone interview.

<sup>69</sup> Guy Lamarche, telephone interview, August 9, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Hautanen, telephone interview.

<sup>71</sup> Lamarche, telephone interview.

In an article for the *National Post*, Tristin Hopper specifically wonders why Shania's shrine failed where Murray's has thrived even as her career is in its twilight. He notes that as plans are in motion to demolish the Shania Twain Centre, the Anne Murray Centre is about to celebrate its 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Possible explanations for the demise of Shania's shrine include the sinking global economy, Timmins' inconvenient location vis-à-vis major city centres, a lack of local buy-in, and Shania's career hiatus. But Hopper ultimately concludes that the reason for the disparity has something to do with the relative Canadianness of Shania's and Murray's music.<sup>72</sup>

Murray's career, he observes, "has traded on the rural charm of her Acadian, maritime roots—an aspect played up by the Springhill attraction." By contrast, Shania's pop fare has "never really exemplified the flannel and grime of a Canadian Shield mining town" like Timmins. As he points out, the music videos for two of her classic songs, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" and "That Don't Impress Me Much," were filmed "in the decidedly un-Canadian locations of New York and the Mojave Desert, respectively." Thus, as cultural historian Stuart Henderson puts it, "You can't immerse yourself in Shania Twain in Timmins because Timmins is not really a part of her."<sup>73</sup>

Shania nonetheless remains a general draw to Timmins. Lamarche says that she "has been a good ambassador for the city, always quick to mention that she is a Northern Ontarian girl from a city called Timmins." Her real impact on tourism, though, depends on "whether she is on Main Street or not" at any given time. As Lamarche explains, "when Shania is on the music charts, and on the touring circuit, there's a greater appetite

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<sup>72</sup> Tristin Hopper, " 'With tourism, you need local buy-in to succeed': Why Shania Twain's Shrine Died, but Anne Murray's Lives On," *National Post*, January 10, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

for Shania memorabilia and all that Shania is,” and the City in turn features her likeness prominently in marketing materials. Conversely, when she “is not on the billboards and is not touring, then there’s less of an appetite,” and she becomes more of a secondary attraction in Timmins compared with popular activities like snowshoeing and snowmobiling. Recently, though, the city has reaped great benefits from Shania’s Oprah Winfrey Network docu-series. Timmins was featured in it, leading to a sudden surge in interest. Going forward, Lamarche expects that Shania’s Las Vegas show will likewise benefit Timmins tourism.<sup>74</sup>

#### *A Commodity*

Like Céline, Shania is not just a musical but also a material commodity. She has her own perfume. She has a paid official fan club. Join today and you will receive a *From This Moment On* bookmark perfect for keeping your page as you read her thusly titled autobiography, as well as a mouse pad emblazoned with her image perfect for clicking around her website to buy additional merchandise. Shania has also endorsed products ranging from jeans to makeup in ad campaigns, calling her ‘authenticity’ into question in the process.

Product endorsement is frowned upon in country music culture, but that has not stopped Shania and the likes of Garth Brooks and Faith Hill from participating in it. Brooks ignited controversy in 2001 when he signed with Dr. Pepper “after more than a decade of publicly denouncing” celebrity endorsements. Hill has participated in

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<sup>74</sup> Lamarche, telephone interview.

“campaigns for products ranging from cell phones to makeup.”<sup>75</sup> Shania, for her part, was most notably featured in commercials for cosmetics company Revlon based on her hit “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” The titular line of this song might as well have been marketing firm-engineered as the perfect jingle for Revlon’s lip gloss, hair dye, and other beauty products.

Shania is also a corporeal commodity. As Fox recalls, “she drew fire in the 1990s as one of the first women performers in country to bare her midriff.” Her skin-showing tendencies have rendered her an object of feminist critique not to mention “a highly lucrative object of male desire beyond country music’s core audience.”<sup>76</sup> A research team led by scientists at the University of Toronto in fact determined that Shania has the “perfect face” based on ideal geometric measurements between her eyes, mouth, and ears.<sup>77</sup>

Shania’s commoditization is further tied up in her widely publicized personal life. As Orin Starn observes in *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal*, “scandal has become a multibillion dollar industry.” The scandal industry, he explains, is propelled by “television, glossy magazines, supermarket tabloids, and gossip blogs ... with the daily newspapers, newsweekly magazines, and other more respectable media joining in to comment on and further

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<sup>75</sup> Jocelyn Neal, “The Voice Behind the Song: Faith Hill, Country Music, and Reflexive Identity,” in *The Women of Country Music: A Reader*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 126.

<sup>76</sup> Fox, “ ‘Alternative’ to What?” 187.

<sup>77</sup> “Perfect Face Dimensions Measured,” *BBC News Online*, December 18, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8421076.stm> (accessed March 12, 2013).

amplify the biggest scandals.”<sup>78</sup> This is certainly illustrated by Shania’s 2008-2010 divorce scandal.

Shania’s divorce from her husband-collaborator Mutt Lange first played out in the tabloids. As though the public were her psychoanalyst, Shania herself has since replayed the divorce to varying degrees in talk show interviews, an Oprah Winfrey Network docu-series, an autobiography, and most recently her Caesars Palace show. Moreover, as I observed over the course of my research on Shania, everyone from music critics to the music industry executives behind her tends to comment on her personal life alongside her music, demonstrating the extent to which her personal life circulates as a commodity like any other. Cultural critic Laura Kipnis argues that celebrity scandal-watching is America’s foremost spectator sport.<sup>79</sup> As with any sport, there are countless opportunities for buy-in, ranging from the seemingly innocent act of turning on the television to the more obvious act of investing in a tell-all memoir like Shania’s *From This Moment On*.

Sociologists Valérie Gorin and Annik Dubied hold that being a star is inextricably “linked to commercial benefits and marketing appeal.” Even in the seemingly sacred space of performance, they argue, stars function as advertisements.<sup>80</sup> For global celebrities like Shania, the ad campaign also extends far beyond the stage.

### *Natural*

On the flipside, Shania’s working-class persona leads many to perceive her as a notably natural and even authentic figure in a sea of plastic pop stars. She is for many

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<sup>78</sup> Orin Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 45.

<sup>79</sup> Laura Kipnis, *How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 7.

<sup>80</sup> Valérie Gorin and Annik Dubied, “Desirable People: Identifying Social Values through Celebrity News,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 4 (May 2011): 609.

fans a woman as earthy as the Canadian wilderness from which she emerged. Regis Philbin's introductory remarks before his 1996 interview with her on *Live! with Regis and Kathie Lee* point to this perspective: "She's country music's hottest performer right now. But before she was taking the world by storm, she was living a life of economic and emotional hardship up there in the woods of Northern Canada."<sup>81</sup> With Shania, there are always these two sides of the coin: she is an incredibly successful star musician, but she is also a person who has been incredibly successful in overcoming a childhood of poverty and abuse. The latter aspect of Shania's public character makes her seem 'real' and appeals strongly to onlookers' sense of pathos in a way that seems nothing if not natural.

A female fan in her forties from Maine who has met Shania a couple of times at promotional events describes her as being "very down to earth, very genuine and true to herself. She cares as a person and as an artist ... She has taught me a lot about how to face my life and problems."<sup>82</sup> According to Tracy Hautanen, who has interacted with hundreds of fans in her capacity as manager of the now-defunct Shania Twain Centre in Timmins, Shania's "down-to-earth style" is in fact second only to her music in attracting fans.<sup>83</sup>

As sociologists Vaughn Schmutz and Alison Faupel observe, "authenticity can be a key source of symbolic value" in pop genres from country to rap to rock. Claims to authenticity typically involve "establishing that a musician or the music is 'genuine,' 'natural' and without 'artifice.'" "If a musician's personality and emotions appear to be

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<sup>81</sup> Shania Twain, interview by Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford, *Live! with Regis and Kathie Lee*, August 29, 1996, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PltVtNC\\_y9E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PltVtNC_y9E) (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> E-mail interview of a Shania Twain fan, June 18, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Hautanen, telephone interview.

natural, he or she seems like the rare “real” person in a field of fakery.<sup>84</sup> Nashville songwriter Rick Giles in fact accounts for country music’s rise to widespread popularity in the nineties in just such emotive terms. In his view, people “naturally gravitate to what’s honest and makes them feel,”<sup>85</sup> and that is what has made country music like Shania’s so successful.

The extent to which an artist’s public life story should permeate interpretations of their music, though, is certainly up for debate. Can an unavoidably commercialized pop star be authentic and natural? Evidently, pop stars like Shania are far from the only objects of commercialization. Guy Lamarche of the City of Timmins describes Shania’s hometown as “an extreme outdoor product” that draws tourists from as far away as Europe.<sup>86</sup> Lamarche’s diction here is key: he describes Timmins’ pristine wilderness as a commodity like any other. The very forests in which Shania practiced singing in her youth are products in a certain light.

Shania music video for “You’ve Got a Way,” in which she plays a flower crown-wearing faerie of sorts in a forest so vibrantly coloured as to be obviously fake, is symbolic of the nature-versus-artifice tension that surrounds her. The vibrant pink, green, blue, yellow, and other hues in the video are not commonly found in nature. As though the forest were not obviously artificial enough, the fourth wall comes down at the end of the video when the studio, film crew, and equipment are shown as Shania makes her way off the set.

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<sup>84</sup> Vaughn Schmutz and Alison Faupel, “Gender and Cultural Consecration in Popular Music,” *Social Forces* 89, no. 2 (2010): 691-92.

<sup>85</sup> Rick Giles, quoted in Joli Jensen, “Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 187.

<sup>86</sup> Lamarche, telephone interview.

### *An Everywoman*

Nature-versus-artifice tensions notwithstanding, Lamarche's characterization of Shania casts her more as an everywoman than anything else:

She is humble, she is from a small town, and she lives that. I saw her for the first time when she was down here ... participating in the Olympic torch run. This was probably the coldest day on record, probably minus forty, and Shania didn't miss a beat. She participated as expected, very resourceful, humble, in fact word has it that unlike most of the runners ... her Olympic red mitts did not have the rubber backing, and therefore her hand was flying off the torch. So being a Northerner, she did what Northerners would do, and that was to be resourceful and ask for some hockey tape.

Beyond her lack of diva-esque demands, Lamarche was struck by how non-intimidating Shania seemed in person when she appeared at a media event he organized for the torch run: "She showed up the way you and I would dress ... wearing a ball cap."<sup>87</sup>

Over the course of my research on Shania, I was also surprised by the extent to which even music executives overseeing her career described her as an average person, albeit one in extraordinary circumstances. Tyson Parker of Universal Music Canada, for instance, explains that in the aftermath of her divorce, Shania

took a lot of time to reflect on what had happened, her life. You take anyone on this planet and put that much success in that short of a timespan, that's going to change everybody. So I think Shania, from her very humble roots to becoming the biggest star on the planet, that took its toll. Then you add into it a very public

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<sup>87</sup> Lamarche, telephone interview.



divorce. parenting... The unfortunate thing with Mutt is what it is, but that's life... you know she has recovered from that, she's remarried, she's met a very, very lovely man, and they're living a great life together.

Speaking of her Vegas show, Parker likewise describes Shania as though she were anyone's next-door neighbor hosting a community get-together rather than a diva drawing paying customers to a massive Vegas spectacle. Since she loves being around her fans but doesn't need any more money, he says that her primary aim with the show is simply "to say 'Hi' to people again ... it's, you know, come to Vegas, come to my ... makeshift backyard and let's sing some songs that I haven't sung in some time."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Parker, telephone interview.

### III. What is Céline's Music?

#### *Cultural Sediment*

As cultural critic Cintra Wilson puts it, “Living in the world right now, unless you are building pipe bombs in a little shack in the woods full-time, you are going to be aware of a certain sedimentary layer of information.” No matter if “you never watch television or listen to the radio,” or even “attempt with your every waking hour to avoid the Top 40 song list.”<sup>89</sup> This cultural sediment is unavoidable, and Céline, along with Shania, is a major element of it on a global scale.

Céline's songs of love lost and found are streamed into the soundscape of everyday life via countless channels liminal and subliminal, visible and invisible. They are frequently played as background music in grocery stores and featured in film soundtracks and television commercials. The result, Wilson notes, is that on the subway she could readily identify a busker's Peruvian pan flute arrangement of “My Heart Will Go On” from *Titanic* (1997). Almost anyone probably could—it is one of the best-selling singles of all time, a true contemporary cultural touchstone.<sup>90</sup>

#### *A Guilty Pleasure*

In a 2002 interview, sociomusicologist Simon Frith pronounced Céline “the most loathed superstar,” noting that she is disliked by everyone from critics to his mother-in-law. He does not even believe it will ever be possible for her to “be redeemed, ABBA-style.” She is just too “naff,” he says.

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<sup>89</sup> Cintra Wilson, *A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Reexamined as a Grotesque, Crippling Disease and Other Cultural Revelations* (New York: Viking, 2000), 30.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

And Frith, it should be noted, is a Céline fan.<sup>91</sup>

*A Guilty Displeasure*

Writing a decade later, Carl Wilson describes the death of the so-called ‘guilty pleasure’ in the wake of ‘poptimism’ which has seen critics and fans alike “proclaim that a chunk of bubblegum pop can shine as brightly as any rock ‘n’ roll Byron’s stab at significance.” Today, “Delight is where you find it, and myriad forms of pop pleasure satisfy diverse publics.” In poptimism’s wake, critics have redeemed everything from ABBA to blackface minstrelsy.<sup>92</sup> Where does that leave Céline?

In light of the expanded critical acceptance of diverse pop musics brought about by poptimism, Wilson wonders whether we should “feel a shame in our pop blind spots to balance our liberated pride in our enjoyments.” In other words, “Should there be such a thing as a guilty displeasure?”<sup>93</sup> This question gave rise to Wilson’s acclaimed book, *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, in which he explores one of his foremost guilty displeasures: Céline. He specifically investigates *Let’s Talk About Love* (1997), the album that unleashed “My Heart Will Go On.”

As Wilson muses, “If in psychoanalysis your fears indicate what you want more than your conscious wishes do, so in aesthetics your hatreds might disclose more than your enthusiasms.”<sup>94</sup> For Wilson, there is even “social value in attempting to feel the heat of other people’s fires, to reconnect the demographic islands on which marketers maroon us.” He views his exploration of Céline, her music, and her fans as a form of community-

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<sup>91</sup> Simon Frith, quoted in Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 14.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 299.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 301.

building.<sup>95</sup>

Uncritically hating Céline, indeed, bears significant political implications in a ‘poptimist’ society. As Wilson explains,

A critical generation claiming to swear off all bourgeois elitist bias seems at least obliged to account for the immense popularity of someone we’ve collectively deemed so devoid of appeal. Those who find Celine ‘naff’—British for tacky, gauche, kitschy, or, as they say in Quebec, *kétaine*—must be overlooking something, maybe starting with why those categories exist.<sup>96</sup>

#### *A Necessary Displeasure*

Céline’s music, and the wider category of supposedly kitschy music to which it belongs, can further be understood as a necessary displeasure for those who castigate it. As Wilson observes, according to sociologist Deena Weinstein’s “Rock Critics Need Bad Music,” “critical authority depends on the power to exclude, not just to canonize.” In practical terms, that “hinges on turning your readership into an in-crowd, smarter than some less-discerning audience.”<sup>97</sup> The gleefully condescending tone of much Céline criticism certainly suggests this attitude.

As Wilson puts it, “A bubbling pool of contempt for the Quebecois warbler became a tsunami in the wake of ‘My Heart Will Go On.’ ” The hit single came in at number three on *Maxim*’s Most Annoying Songs Ever List (2005), accompanied by the following commentary: “The *Titanic* sinking cost some 1,500 people their lives. Celine hasn’t killed that many yet, but give her time. The second most tragic event to result from

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<sup>95</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 303.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-301.

<sup>97</sup> Weinstein (2004), cited in Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 15.

that fabled ocean liner continues to torment humanity years later, as Canada's cruelest shows off a voice as loud as a sonic boom, though not nearly so pretty."<sup>98</sup>

In another flagrant display of cultural elitism, the *Independent on Sunday*'s "Why are they famous?" column paints the following pathetic picture of Céline's fan base: "Wedged between vomit and indifference, there must be a fan base: some middle-of-the-road Middle England invisible to the rest of us. Grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phone salesmen and shopping-centre devotees, presumably."<sup>99</sup> In more pointed criticism, *Rolling Stone* critic Rob Sheffield characterizes Céline's voice as "just furniture polish."<sup>100</sup> And at a more personal level of invective, Cintra Wilson describes Céline as "the most wholly repellant woman ever to sing songs of love."<sup>101</sup>

Evidently, not only is Céline widely hated; hating her is a sport of sorts, a source of amusement. Her name alone fills out the number one spot on Sarah Vowell's 1999 list of best Canadian jokes for *Salon*.<sup>102</sup> In the hit comedy film *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), one of the protagonist's ploys to get her boyfriend to dump her is to take him to a Céline concert when he thinks they are going to a basketball game.

Describing his personal perceptions of Céline's music, Wilson writes that it seems to him "like monotony writ huge, R & B with the sex and slyness clinically removed, French chanson severed from its wit." Altogether, for him, it is like "Oprah-certified

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<sup>98</sup> Most Annoying Songs Ever List, *Maxim*, Fall 2005, quoted in Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 300.

<sup>99</sup> "Why are they famous? Celine Dion," *Independent on Sunday*, March 28, 1999, quoted in Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 302.

<sup>100</sup> Rob Sheffield, review of *A New Day Has Come*, *Rolling Stone*, May 9, 2002, quoted in Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 300.

<sup>101</sup> Cintra Wilson (2000), quoted in Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 300.

<sup>102</sup> Sarah Vowell, "My Favorite Things," *Salon*, January 5, 2000, cited in Wilson, "All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz," 300.

chicken soup for the consumerist soul.” Witticisms aside, Wilson insists that “her singing always made [him] cringe in revulsion,” a perspective he claims is shared by practically everyone he knows.<sup>103</sup> He pronounces her music “overproduced, clichéd, bombastic, unnuanced, conformist, lacking risk and surprise.” Frankly, he finds these qualities in her music embarrassing. And worse still, he finds he cannot “manage the embarrassment by listening to Celine as camp.” For him, the diva’s “excesses don’t reach cathartic levels of bad taste”; rather, they present themselves as unfortunate “side effects of trying to be romantic, of trying, in fact, to be tasteful.”<sup>104</sup>

Ultimately, for Wilson, Céline’s music is best categorized as schmaltz. In his definition, schmaltz involves ethnic Jewish, Italian, Spanish, Irish, or French-Canadian singers producing “shamelessly over-the-top emotion for the pleasure of more vanilla audiences—perhaps as a racially palatable alternative to black music.” Schmaltz, indeed, intersects with opera. Céline’s music in particular harkens back to the popular opera of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “the pop of Jenny Lind and Caruso and Callas, and later the likes of the Irish tenor John McCormack or the Italian belter Mario Lanza.” Like the music of these opera stars, Céline’s music features vocal prowess and an emphatic brand of passion. She has even dueted with the likes of Luciano Pavarotti and Andrea Bocelli.<sup>105</sup>

The sentimentality thus oozing from Céline’s oeuvre is something many love to hate. Yet the displeasure it engenders for some listeners is necessary not just so critics have something to critique, but for democratic reasons. Simply put, there needs to be

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<sup>103</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 300.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

music for everyone. As Wilson notes, Kant and Hegel argue that ideally everyone in society would agree on matters of taste. But as Wilson also points out, according to the philosophy of Alexander Nehamas, “To say everyone ought to like what I like is to suggest everyone should be alike.” This line of reasoning renders Kant and Hegel’s vision of a universally accepted sense of taste more eerie than ideal.<sup>106</sup>

### *Pleasure*

Céline has sold more than 200 million albums worldwide, making her the best-selling female artist of all time, not to mention the best-selling French artist of all time. So strong is Céline’s appeal that “Her legions tithe their salaries to attend her Las Vegas revue.”<sup>107</sup> Evidently, her music is pleasurable to too many people, and profitable in too many markets, to discount it altogether.

Chuck Taylor, formerly of *Billboard*, is unique among North American critics in his enthusiasm for Céline’s music. He particularly admires “the purity of her voice” and “the passion of her vocals.” As he explained to me, he grew up listening to singers like Karen Carpenter “who could wrap their emotions around the simplest turn of phrase.” So when he first heard Céline’s voice, he “knew something spectacular had reached radio.” Where other critics just heard “acrobatics,” he “heard the soul of a timeless talent.”<sup>108</sup>

Taylor acknowledges being “one of a handful who believes that [‘My Heart Will Go On’] never wore out its welcome.” Live performances of the song ritually make him “whimper like a baby.” For him, “It aches, it commands, it soars and ebbs with so many

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<sup>106</sup> Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 155.

<sup>107</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 300.

<sup>108</sup> Taylor, e-mail interview.

emotions.”<sup>109</sup> The fact that Céline’s music lacks qualities that critics like Carl Wilson typically listen for—such as “sonic innovation, verbal inventiveness, social criticism, rough exuberance, erotic charge”<sup>110</sup>—evidently does not phase Taylor. For him, the affective power of Céline’s music seems to fill any and all voids.

### *Global*

Wilson observes that from Asia to the Middle East to Africa, Céline is, intriguingly, “one of the three or four best-loved Western musicians, with none of the backlash.”<sup>111</sup> In “‘Country Roads’ to Globalization: Sociological Models for Understanding American Popular Music in China,” Heidi Netz Rupke and Grant Blank examine this very phenomenon of music that is to some extent disliked and deemed cheesy by North Americans being adored abroad. The authors conducted a survey querying Chinese students—aged 22-40, with roughly equal numbers of males and females—about their American musical preferences. The results are striking. The most-liked song, specified by more than a third of the 153 respondents, was Céline’s “My Heart Will Go On” (1997), with John Denver’s country track “Take Me Home, Country Roads” (1971) and The Carpenters’ “Yesterday Once More” (1973) coming in second and third, respectively. So popular is Céline’s *Titanic* theme in China that a school near one of the researcher’s apartments “had a clock that played [the] tune every fifteen minutes in the manner of a grandfather clock.”<sup>112</sup>

How does one explain the immense popularity of “My Heart Will Go On”—a

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<sup>109</sup> Taylor, e-mail interview.

<sup>110</sup> Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 300.

<sup>112</sup> Heidi Netz Rupke and Grant Blank, “‘Country Roads’ to Globalization: Sociological Models for Understanding American Popular Music in China,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 1 (February 2009): 137.



song widely loathed and mocked in North America—in China? Rupke and Blank posit a number of possible answers. First of all, they observe that the theme of lost love expressed in Céline’s song is a common theme in Chinese literature and music. For example, “One famous Chinese love story tells of a concubine who committed suicide when the emperor was cornered in battle,” paralleling “the tragic love story depicted in the film *Titanic* and its famous theme song.”<sup>113</sup> Secondly, Rupke and Blank note that “Both the theme and the structure of the song make it accessible to most Chinese. The passive stance of the lover is an honorable one in Chinese culture, signifying faithfulness even after death. This song’s simple, repetitive lyrics are easy to understand, even to Chinese people with only basic English skills.” Finally, and most fundamentally, Céline’s music and image in general complement the Confucian values of virtue and family underlying Chinese society.<sup>114</sup>

Céline’s active efforts to reach out to international audiences clearly contribute to her popularity among them as well. For instance, a YouTube video of her participating in a lion dance to celebrate the 2012 lunar new year and the opening of a new tower at Caesars Palace moved one Vietnamese fan enough to comment on how touching it was to see Céline recognizing the holiday.<sup>115</sup> As Taylor explains, Céline “has a natural curiosity about different people, different cultures—and plays to them, learning to speak at least a

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<sup>113</sup> Rupke and Blank, 139.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-31.

<sup>115</sup> Tuong Vu, comment on “Celine Dion at the Opening of Octavius Tower at Caesars Palace 22/01/12,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrFiENvT1H0> (accessed March 12, 2013).

few words in their native language, meeting fans, political leaders and dignitaries, tasting their food and absorbing all the many experiences with the utmost humility.”<sup>116</sup>

Taylor also points out that Céline has completed several world tours to reach out to international audiences, visiting not just major, massive venues like Wembley Stadium and Madison Square Garden but venturing out to “little pockets around the globe.”<sup>117</sup> Her music additionally travels on its own to some extent. A male Malaysian fan, for instance, writes of first being exposed to her music through a Malaysian singer, Siti Nurhaliza, who covered “I Surrender” at a concert. At the time, he had no idea who the original singer was. But when Céline’s Taking Chances Tour came to Malaysia and her *A New Day... Vegas* show was broadcast on a local television channel, he realized it was Céline and became a fan “till death.”<sup>118</sup>

#### *‘Other’*

In their study examining the American musical preferences of Chinese youth, Rupke and Blank include a special note with their speculations as to why “My Heart Will Go On”—a song by a Canadian—played so heavily in responses to their survey question prompting respondents to specify their favourite American song. On one hand, they note, “Chinese may not realize she is Canadian.” On the other hand, “they may not make clear distinctions between Canadian and American popular singers.” On the basis that there is no way to ascertain either possibility, Rupke and Blank include Céline in their study of “American” music.<sup>119</sup> Not only do the Chinese students, halfway across the globe, place Céline in the same category as American pop stars however knowingly or unknowingly.

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<sup>116</sup> Taylor, e-mail interview.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 22, 2013.

<sup>119</sup> Rupke and Blank, 135.

So do the researchers.

What is more, “Americans in particular often mistake Dion for French or indefinably ‘other,’ and rather less frequently make the connection to Quebec,”<sup>120</sup> in the way that many perceive Cirque du Soleil as French rather than specifically Québécois.<sup>121</sup> But in any case, Céline lacks a singular musical identity, just as she lacks a defined cultural identity. As Hurley explains,

Neither a composer nor an instrumental musician, she interprets and performs other people’s songs. She is a vocal chameleon whose song stylings cover the spectrum of contemporary popular music genres: from Mariah Carey-like power anthems (“Power of Love”), to Meat Loaf’s Broadway-rock theatrics (“It’s All Coming Back to Me Now”), to the Backstreet Boys’ upbeat harmonics (“That’s the Way It Is”), to Barbra Streisand’s adult contemporary easy-listening (“Tell Him”), to Euro-pop’s synthesizer-heavy romanticism (“Je danse dans ma tête”), to *chanson*’s close word-music pairings (“S’il suffisait d’aimer”).<sup>122</sup>

In other words, not only is Céline’s public persona a network of selves; her oeuvre itself is a catchall primed to transcend geocultural boundaries. In theory at least, she offers something for almost everyone. She draws so extensively on ‘other’ musicians and their respective styles and genres that her ‘self’ is a mosaic of them.

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<sup>120</sup> Wilson (2007), cited in Hurley, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Hurley, 13.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 142

#### IV. What is Shania's Music?

##### *Commercial*

Shania's music exists at the borders of two principal genres, country and pop, which has the economic effect of opening her up to a vast demographic of music listeners and enhancing her earning potential. On the flipside, her career has required more financial resources than the average country singer has access to. Shania's first successful album, *The Woman in Me*, cost more than double the average for a country music album, with half of the costs being covered by her rock producer husband Mutt Lange.<sup>123</sup>

As Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal note, in common conceptions only alternative country musicians "live the troubadour life full of great personal sacrifice." Commercial country stars like Shania allegedly "surrender to the star-making machine knowing that they must, in the words of Lisa Gubernick " 'get hot or go home' to the double-wide trailer."<sup>124</sup> From another perspective, though, a major commercial country promoter says that alt-country performers simply lack the talent and motivation to achieve commercial success.<sup>125</sup> For this commentator, 'authenticity' is just a self-soothing excuse for poor sales.

In the alt-country world Garth Brooks is known as the "Anti-Hank," implying that his work goes against the grain of Hank Williams as the supposed epitome of country music authenticity. Shania's music, though, is not just so-called "Nashville country," a

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<sup>123</sup> Angelo A. Marade, Jeffrey A. Gibbons, and Thomas M. Brinthaup, "The Role of Risk-Taking in Songwriting Success," *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 41, no. 2 (June 2007): 140.

<sup>124</sup> Lisa Rebecca Gubernick (1993), cited in Peterson and Beal, 234.

<sup>125</sup> Peterson and Beal, 234.

term connoting “manufactured and insincere” country music like Brooks’.<sup>126</sup> Shania’s music, in fact, is not really “Nashville” at all, being produced by the Zambian-born British man behind arena rock hits by the likes of AC/DC, Foreigner, and Def Leppard. As Aaron Fox notes, she has “been criticized by country music industry insiders for breaking with country production conventions” by collaborating with Lange. She has likewise never been given much credit for her songwriting abilities, despite co-writing nearly all of her material.<sup>127</sup>

Shania indeed seems to be not just Anti-Hank but Pro-Anti-Hank. She gives the “plastic product”<sup>128</sup> stereotype of Nashville country music new meaning in her apparently infinite malleability, which has seen her transform from country songstress to Bollywood princess to Sufi seductress and well beyond. She is an out-of-tune Southern porchfront guitar-strummer in the video for “No One Needs to Know,” then an Indian bride sporting a shimmering wedding sari and golden bindi in “From This Moment On,” then a whirling dervish wearing revealing white gowns and veils among headscarved Muslims in “The Woman in Me (Needs the Man in You).”

Shania’s music has been critiqued as “formulaic.”<sup>129</sup> Yet she herself is evidently a progenitor of the very formula she is measured against, being unlike any country diva that has come before her in her global appeal and success. As Chris Nelson points out, her album *Up!* was the first of its kind, “a multiversion presentation that record industry

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<sup>126</sup> Peterson and Beal, 234.

<sup>127</sup> Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What?” 187.

<sup>128</sup> Peterson and Beal, 234.

<sup>129</sup> Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What?” 187.

executives could not recall ever happening before.”<sup>130</sup> To say the least, Shania has “eschew[ed] the ideology of distinctively personal expression that dominates alternative country discourse”<sup>131</sup> in favour of more universal discourse. As Canadian rocker Ab Bryant bluntly puts it, her music “is marketed toward every person on the planet. There’s no boundaries anymore. It could appeal to a 10-year-old kid or a 50-year-old Grateful Dead fan. It just covers the whole market.”<sup>132</sup>

### *Elizabethan Sonnetry*

In “The Delight of Words: The Elizabethan Sonneteers and American Country Lyricists,” literary scholar Jill Tedford Jones eschews notions of commercialization degrading country music’s artistic value. She frames a number of country singer-songwriters’ oeuvres, including Shania’s, in the high art terms of the Elizabethan sonnet tradition. Just as Céline as a vocal virtuoso can be considered a kind of opera star, Shania as a singer-songwriter can be considered a modern-day trobairitz of sorts.

Jones specifically argues that the structures and tropes apparent in Shania’s songs and those of others such as Garth Brooks and JoDee Messina can be traced back to poetry by the likes of Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Walter Raleigh. As she is quick to note, beyond a few madrigals, Elizabethan sonnets were not typically set to music. Nonetheless, her comparison sheds light on the timelessness of language. While language has evolved a great deal from the Elizabethan era to the present, Jones observes some striking linguistic constancies in the sonnets and

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<sup>130</sup> Chris Nelson, “A Marketing Surprise in Shania Twain’s New CD,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2002.

<sup>131</sup> Fox, “ ‘Alternative’ to What?” 187.

<sup>132</sup> Ab Bryant, quoted in Greg Potter, *Hand Me Down World: The Canadian Pop-Rock Paradox* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1999), 186-87.

contemporary country songs.<sup>133</sup>

Both Elizabethan sonnets and country songs are topically centered around love, using rhyming, figurative language to convey feelings associated with it. Elizabethan sonneteers are more formulaic in style than country singers, but the same conventions of “colloquial diction, dialectal forms, non-standard grammar, clichés, and simple vocabulary” hold true. While figurative language today is part of our vernacular, Elizabethan courtiers learned figurative language—specifically “almost two hundred tropes and schemes in the Latin poetry and prose”—as part of their formative education. Country songwriters today, by contrast, are “inheritors of an English in which these tricks of language are deeply embedded,” being widely used if not as commonly singled out and identified. For Jones, “The line from Sidney to Brooks thus demonstrates the process of democratization in literary history.”<sup>134</sup>

Rhetorical devices present in Shania’s songs and Elizabethan sonnets alike include antithesis and anaphora. Antithesis “involves the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure.” Shakespeare exemplifies this rhetorical device in Sonnet 154 when he expresses that “Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love.” In her signature song, Shania likewise asserts, “Man, I feel like a woman.”<sup>135</sup>

Anaphora, for its part, involves “the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses.” Elizabethan poet Thomas Campion exemplifies this device in “Now Winter Nights Enlarge,” repeating the first word of each line as he describes how people each have their own unique abilities:

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<sup>133</sup> Jill Tedford Jones, “The Delight of Words: The Elizabethan Sonneteers and American Country Lyricists,” *Popular Music and Society* 24, no. 4 (2000): 63.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-65.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

Some measure comely tread,

Some knotted riddles tell,

Some poems smoothly read.

Likewise, Twain sings to her love interest in “Don’t Be Stupid (You Know I Love You)”:

Don’t be stupid. You know I love ya.

Don’t be ridiculous. You know I need ya.

Don’t be absurd. You know I want ya.

Don’t be impossible...<sup>136</sup>

As Jones’ ‘poptimistic’ scholarship shows, Shania’s working-class music is ironically erudite in its origins. The question of whether attaching something highbrow (Elizabethan sonnets) to something lowbrow (Shania’s music) points in the direction of a nobrow culture remains up for debate. Jones’ inclination to draw the likes of Shania into the classical literary sphere perhaps speaks more to the unspoken need for legitimizing seemingly lowbrow research topics on highbrow terms in order for them to be accepted by the cultural elite.

### *Uplifting*

A fan-conducted 2000 study of Shania’s online fan community shows that self-confidence, love, and happiness are among the top values that fans associate with Shania and her music.<sup>137</sup> Shania goes *Up!* and her fans rise up emotionally with her. She thus exemplifies George Gerbner and Larry Gross’ cultivation theory in musical terms.

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<sup>136</sup> Jones, 73.

<sup>137</sup> FV, “Shania’s Fan Base and Its Marketing Potentials: A Statistical Analysis of Shania Twain’s Fan Community Based on an Online Survey Posted at [www.everythingshania.com](http://www.everythingshania.com),” Shania Twain North American Online Fan Club, July 9, 2000, <http://www.shaniafans.com/surveyresults.htm> (accessed March 12, 2013).



Cultivation theory is a model of television's long term-effects according to which viewers come to believe the realities they see depicted onscreen over time, which ultimately impacts the way they perceive their own lives.<sup>138</sup> Like television, Shania frames reality for her listeners. Fans, in turn, embrace and execute the uplifting reality she presents to them in their own lives. As with Céline's songs, nearly all of Shania's songs have a positive bent whether in terms of an upbeat rhythm or inspirational lyrics.

Few songwriters are as enthusiastic about exclamation marks as Shania: eight out of the nineteen song titles on her album *Up!* are thus punctuated, rendering even songs about dark subject matter like the American sociocultural obsession with material wealth ("Ka-Ching!") and a love interest's wandering eye ("Waiter! Bring Me Water!") uplifting. Even when telling a sleazy guy at a bar to get lost in "(If You're Not In It For Love) I'm Outta Here!" she is nothing if not upbeat. The music video mirrors the lighthearted tone of the song by showing Shania dancing and joking around at a club. Gags like a guy pulling out a chair from beneath her as she attempts to sit down send up any serious notions about insincere love interests suggested by the song's title and lyrics. As a female fan in her forties from Maine puts it, "Shania is fun, regardless of what a person may go through she is able to make you forget your problems and enjoy life."<sup>139</sup>

Just as Céline's fans admire not only her music but also her personal qualities, Shania's fans clearly find her tragic life story—the subtext of her unremittingly upbeat songs—inspirational. A male fan in his thirties from Pennsylvania writes of attending her 2004 *Up!* Tour in order to, true to the theme, "get away from the pressures of life." His

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<sup>138</sup> See George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (1976): 173-99.

<sup>139</sup> E-mail interview of a Shania Twain fan, June 18, 2012.

aunt had just died, and he had been taking care of her during her illness, which led him to feel “connected to Shania because she took care of her siblings” in the wake of her parents’ death.<sup>140</sup>

Tracy Hautanen, formerly of the Shania Twain Centre, tells me that “a majority of the people that follow Shania Twain and her lifestyle are people that are very family-oriented, enjoy upbeat music that isn’t a ‘tear in your beer’ kind of song, and just generally appreciate life.” Songs in the vein of Hank Williams’ “There’s a Tear in My Beer” indeed have no place in Shania’s oeuvre of self-empowering anthems. Hautanen further explains that Shania’s fan community itself is like a family, built up over the years at the Shania Twain Centre’s annual fan conventions in Timmins which once drew a hundred attendees. As she remarks, “I’m betting that in Las Vegas I can see a lot of people that I know, but they’re not just going there for Shania, they’re going there for the friendships that they’ve built too.”<sup>141</sup>

Shania’s music has thus not only uplifted fans but also brought them together as a community. On the flipside, her music is so unrelentingly positive that, like Céline’s music, it makes certain onlookers uncomfortable and is sometimes the target of sarcastic critique. For instance, in his book on the nineties country music boom, Bruce Feiler describes Shania’s first major album, *The Woman in Me*, as “a mix of bubble-bath self-caressing songs and funky I-am-woman-hear-me-roar numbers.”<sup>142</sup>

### *Untraditional*

Just as Shania is an unpopular cultural figure with scholars, her music is

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<sup>140</sup> E-mail interview with a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

<sup>141</sup> Hautanen, telephone interview.

<sup>142</sup> Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud: Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes, and the Changing Face of Nashville* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 214.

unpopular with critics, particularly those who are bastions of country music tradition. In “Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom,” communications scholar Joli Jensen explains that mainstream media coverage of country music in the nineties went from being inquiring in tone about the genre’s rise to mainstream prominence to being a “morality tale about the dire consequences of economic success for country music’s authenticity” in the late nineties.<sup>143</sup> A pivotal figure in this country music boom and its media coverage was, of course, Shania.

As Jensen observes, critical notions of what ‘good’ country music is ebb and flow with sociocultural tides. Criticism typically suggests that “good country is real and traditional; bad country is formulaic and commercial.” Yet ironically, “the same music can be demonized as formulaic and commercial (as was the Nashville Sound of the late 1950s and early 1960s) and later be valorized as real and traditional.”<sup>144</sup> If today’s critically acceptable country music was yesterday’s critically unacceptable country music, one wonders what position Shania’s music will occupy in the critical sphere in decades to come.

Illustrating this critical circularity, Jensen notes that in the early nineties the likes of Garth Brooks “were lauded as evidence of country music’s new vitality, interest, and appeal.” But by the middle of the decade, the commercial success of Brooks, Shania, and others like them was viewed “as detrimental to the music, and as hastening its predicted downfall.”<sup>145</sup> Mid-nineties commentators such as country singer-songwriter Marty Stuart “argue[d] for the vital role of country music history and tradition and [found] 1990s

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<sup>143</sup> Jensen, 183.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

country music to be much too pop sounding and uncreative.”<sup>146</sup> Yet as Jensen points out, “there is a vast country music industry—radio, records, venues, tours, theme parks—dependent both on keeping the distinction between country and other forms of pop music, *and* on shifting the boundaries to follow mainstream taste.” The apparent conflict between commercial and traditional values in country music leads her to wonder, “Can good country music be commercially successful, and creative or original ... but still thematically or stylistically country?”<sup>147</sup>

Pop music critic Dave Tianen answers in the affirmative in his November 1997 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article entitled “Shania Won’t Be the Death of Country.” He acknowledges that the conventional topics of “extended family, Jesus and hard times don’t appear” in Shania’s music and that her songs seem like “well-crafted pop ... with country flourishes.” But ultimately, he insists, “If country radio plays Shania Twain records and a new generation of country music fans buy them in droves, there’s a basic sense in which Shania Twain is a country musician. Nothing Marty Stuart or anybody else says is likely to change that.”<sup>148</sup>

Yet according to Aaron Fox, from a broader perspective all of the ‘good’ music versus ‘bad’ music debates surrounding country music miss the overriding point of country music as a genre:

You can argue all day long about whether Shania Twain makes bad country music or Alan Jackson makes good country music, and many people do argue all day long about such questions, just as people almost certainly argued, in the late

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<sup>146</sup> Jensen, 191.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Dave Tianen, “Shania Won’t Be the Death of Country,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 9, 1997, quoted in Jensen, 190.

1920s, about whether Jimmie Rodgers' music was really country (or rather hillbilly) or whether his music embraced his commodity status (as pop) too abjectly—the same argument stimulated in later decades by Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, and (yes) Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. At least for country, as working-class music, discriminating judgments of *musical* badness and goodness miss the rhetorical point of the music itself, and the cultural essence of its practice. It's all good *because* it's all bad.<sup>149</sup>

### *Global*

Shania's fans come from all age groups and cultural backgrounds, something which speaks to the wide appeal of her music, a quality which in turn seems to be equal parts engineered and natural. She not only has English fan sites but even a Portuguese one based out of Brazil, where teen pop duo Sandy & Junior has sung a Portuguese version of "Any Man of Mine." As Tyson Parker of Universal Music Canada points out, in Canada alone Shania has sold nearly ten million albums, meaning that about one in three Canadians own a Shania album. Shania's fans, Parker concludes, are "a very, very diverse group of people" to the point that he is not even sure that a typical or average Shania fan exists.<sup>150</sup>

Shania's music video for "Forever and for Always" is emblematic of her broad appeal. Frequent cuts from footage of Shania singing the song on a beach to shots of different couples in love—a child couple, a twentysomething hippie couple, and a senior couple—suggest that she can narrate love stories in broad strokes. In political terms, she

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<sup>149</sup> Aaron A. Fox, "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as 'Bad' Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59.

<sup>150</sup> Parker, telephone interview.

functions as a kind of melting pot.

Shania's attempts to be everything to everyone have aroused some critical suspicion. She herself once remarked that she felt the need to give her audience "what they want to hear ... the rock influence, the blues influence," and so forth.<sup>151</sup> Sociologist George H. Lewis enters the fray with some carefully chosen words, writing of how her breakout album, *The Woman in Me* (1995), rose "to the top of both the country and cheesecake charts."<sup>152</sup>

Many music critics are similarly cynical about Shania's practice of releasing multiple versions of her albums: *Come on Over* (1997) and *Up!* (2002) were both released in country, pop, and international versions and went many times platinum. As Chris Nelson of the *New York Times* sarcastically asks, "are smooth jazz and opera takes from Ms. Twain on the way?" Nelson even went so far as to demand this question of her label, reporting that "No one at her label would confirm that other styles are waiting in the wings. Nor will they rule them out, given the reputation of Ms. Twain's producer ... 'Mutt is the king of remixing things,' said Kim Markovchick, Mercury's senior vice president for marketing."<sup>153</sup>

Parker provides a more nuanced, humanistic account of how and why Shania has diversified her music and image all the way to the bank:

Life has afforded her the ability to take many different cultures, and many different cultures' art and music, and combine it into hers. I think that she very

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<sup>151</sup> Shania Twain, quoted in Clark Parsons, "Shania Twain: In Command," *Journal of Country Music* 18, no. 3 (1996): 17.

<sup>152</sup> George H. Lewis, "Lap Dancer or Hillbilly Deluxe? The Cultural Constructions of Modern Country Music," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 163.

<sup>153</sup> Chris Nelson, "A Marketing Surprise in Shania Twain's New CD," *New York Times*, November 25, 2002.

wisely expanded her boundaries beyond the country music genre ... she was wise to branch out and look at what the world has to offer musically and take a lot of that and put it into her own talent.

For Parker, then, Shania's global success speaks both to her natural curiosity about different cultures and to her commercial astuteness<sup>154</sup>—just like Céline as Chuck Taylor describes her.

Parker also notes that Shania has been a trendsetter in terms of incorporating multicultural influences into her work. Just as she as an artist has diversified, Parker feels she has inspired her fans to do the same.<sup>155</sup> Whether Bollywood (the theme for the international version of *Up!*), Eastern spiritual meditation (which she appears to be practicing in her music video for “Don’t”), Irish clog dancing (which she and a back-up troupe perform in her video for “Don’t Be Stupid (You Know I Love You)”), and other such culturally specific practices that she incorporates in her work should ethically be trends is another matter.

In any case, Shania is artistically omnivorous, which has the convenient benefit of making her work approachable to diverse audiences. The top YouTube comment for her music video for “The Woman in Me”—in which she dances in the streets and temples of Cairo, sails down the Nile, and sashays in front of pyramids—is by an Egyptian fan who enthuses that it is set in his country. “[H]ow many likes for Egypt :)?” he asks. So far, he has garnered eighty-one.<sup>156</sup> Like the term “world music” itself, Shania is a catchall.<sup>157</sup> As

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<sup>154</sup> Parker, telephone interview.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> dj timoor, comment on “Shania Twain – The Woman in Me (Needs the Man in You),” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TEhliSh\\_f4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TEhliSh_f4) (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>157</sup> David Byrne, “I Hate World Music,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1999.

she invitingly sings in “Rock This Country!,” “no matter where you live this buzz is for you.”

Parker also points out that, different from the case of many country artists, Shania’s fan base is spread across both rural and urban regions. There is definitely a rural demographic of listeners, he says, but at the same time her biggest Canadian market is Toronto, contradicting any of her perceived “country bumpkin-ness” and notions that “her audience is just in Orangeville, Ontario.” Her fan base, he concludes, is “a little bit of country and a little bit of rock ’n’ roll.”<sup>158</sup>

Parker’s observations reflect the growing trend that sociologist George H. Lewis explicates in “Lap Dancer or Hillbilly Deluxe? The Cultural Constructions of Modern Country Music” for contemporary country music to be “listened to, and purchased by, a multi-faceted audience with various competing—and even sometimes conflicting—social values and positions.” As Lewis points out, there is even survey research to back this up. Studies by Tom Smith (1994) and Richard A. Peterson and Roger Kern (1995) have “revealed several distinct demographic clusters of country fans whose differing *habiti*—to use Bourdieu’s 1984 term—suggest quite different social constructions of authenticity, taste and lifestyle.”<sup>159</sup> Alongside “hard core traditionals” are “newer ‘transition-30’s’ baby booms listeners,” a “younger Lollapalooza-age audience,” and “country ‘converts’ ” with fluctuating musical taste—what Peterson and Kern call “musical omnivores,” people just as likely to listen to Cecilia Bartoli as they are to Merle Haggard. The country music

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<sup>158</sup> Chris Nelson, “A Marketing Surprise in Shania Twain’s New CD,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2002.

<sup>159</sup> Lewis, 169.



industry has responded by promoting a string of singers in the vein of Garth Brooks, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Shania likely to appeal to such a diverse audience.<sup>160</sup>

In “Postmodern Polyamory or Postcolonial Challenge?” Renée T. Coulombe describes how the circulation of a *mélange* of musical influences has both produced exotic “flavouring” in formulaic pop songs via parody and created altogether new sonic landscapes via pastiche. For Coulombe, “the bringing together of a vast array of sounds sampled from all over the world, and creating something new *without* imposing a system of dominance over the original” represents “mastery over a complex cultural landscape.”<sup>161</sup> This is an ideal perhaps out of reach for Shania, insofar as her innate star power inevitably imposes a certain system of dominance over anything she chooses to incorporate in her work.

That power, however, does not inevitably override that of each member of her global audience. Cultural constructions from “lap dancer” to “bluegrass picker” to “hillbilly deluxe” are all available in nineties boom-era country music,<sup>162</sup> leaving the power of choice to some extent in listeners’ hands. In Shania’s case, one can even add “Bollywood princess,” “Sufi seductress,” “Zen meditator,” and numerous other cultural constructions to the list. Like Céline, she is a cultural mosaic.

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<sup>160</sup> Lewis, 169.

<sup>161</sup> Renée T. Coulombe, “Postmodern Polyamory or Postcolonial Challenge?” in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 185.

<sup>162</sup> Lewis, 171.

## V. Céline in Las Vegas

### i. What is Las Vegas?

#### *A Work of Art*

Céline and Las Vegas are a natural pair in many respects. The most central bond they share involves the art versus artifice debate that mutually surrounds them. Just as one might consider whether Céline's music is cool, calculating, and mechanical or the purest distillation of human emotion, one wonders whether Sin City is as simply superficial as it seems or something more. In one sense, it is a virtual postmodern collage masterminded by some of the most inventive corporate and creative geni of our time.

The architects behind *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) propelled Las Vegas onto the critical radar at a time when the notion of neon signs and kitschy historical replicas as art was only nascent.<sup>163</sup> These pioneers in postmodern aesthetics rejected the modernist idea that “form is function,” promoting instead an “architecture that stresses signs and symbols, with no distinction between high culture and popular culture.”<sup>164</sup> Rebecca Solnit, writing three decades later, poetically describes the Strip as a “jungle of neon vines and flowers and words dancing, bubbling, exploding.”<sup>165</sup>

#### *A Forgery*

From another perspective, Las Vegas—a bastion of fakery with its panoply of themed hotels and casinos—represents “the biggest acceleration of the distance between

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<sup>163</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

<sup>164</sup> Venturi, Brown, and Izenour (1972), cited in Giovanna Franci, *Dreaming of Italy: Las Vegas and the Virtual Grand Tour* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>165</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, new ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 278.

the sign and the signifier.”<sup>166</sup> So if Las Vegas is art, perhaps it is a forgery, amounting to no more than empty parody and pastiche. The ancient Rome-themed home of Céline’s show, Caesars Palace, is an extreme example, separated from its source culture by thousands of miles and years.

Adding another layer to the sense of heterotopia, Céline herself is far removed from her Québec origins in Las Vegas, but imports her cultural roots to some extent by sprinkling her shows with French expressions and songs. She subtly imparts a different dimension of Francophone culture to Vegas beyond the Paris and Monte Carlo of the respectively named resort-casinos.

#### *A Grand Tour*

Visiting Las Vegas today is a pilgrimage in many senses of the term. People flock there for quick weddings, coming-of-age celebrations, gambling sprees, and spectacular shows by stars-in-residence like Céline. Giovanna Franci argues that Vegas, with its array of European-themed resort-casinos from Caesars Palace to the Venetian to the Bellagio, is a virtual “copy of the Grand Tour in Europe, and especially, in Italy.”<sup>167</sup> Attilio Brilli defines the Grand Tour as “travels taken between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, first by generations of European aristocrats and bourgeois, and then by Americans.”<sup>168</sup> These travels, Franci explains, had a dual goal of education and pleasure. They were “a Coming of Age for upper-class youth, but also the sentimental journey of Pre-Romantic and Romantic artists.”<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Claudia Bell and John Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 162.

<sup>167</sup> Franci, 19.

<sup>168</sup> Attilio Brilli (1995), quoted in Franci, 15.

<sup>169</sup> Franci, 15.

For many Céline fans in particular, visiting Las Vegas is certainly as momentous an undertaking as a Grand Tour of Europe. Fans make the pilgrimage to Vegas from all corners of the world, and many seem to embrace the star's current position as an unmovable museum piece of sorts. As Lisa, a fan from Australia, sympathetically explains: "She's there so she can stay in one place with her family and not live out of a suitcase. Myself and numerous fans are willing to travel across the world to see her perform."<sup>170</sup> Just as the *Mona Lisa* does not move, Céline need not tour: her fans will come to her. Carina from Kristiansand ventured "all the way from Norway to Las Vegas just to see [her] idol."<sup>171</sup>

Many fans must surmount not just geographical but also personal and financial barriers on the way to fulfilling their dream of attending Céline's Vegas show. Jill, a young fan from Ohio, writes that attending the show against all odds made her "realize that if you really want something and you put your mind to it, you can make it happen." She describes the labour-intensive process of convincing her parents to let her purchase tickets. "They were thrilled that I wanted to buy the tickets myself," she remarks, "but they were not Celine lovers." After many months, they relented.<sup>172</sup> For a female fan from the East Coast who "had never been much of a traveler," visiting Las Vegas was a similarly formative experience, being her "first big trip and first time on an airplane."<sup>173</sup>

#### *The Extraordinary as Ordinary*

Just as countless fans perceive Céline as a notably down-to-earth star—an ordinary person living an extraordinary life—philosopher Bruce Bégout conceives of Las

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<sup>170</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

<sup>171</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 15, 2012.

<sup>172</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 15, 2012.

<sup>173</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 18, 2012.

Vegas as a fundamentally normal place. Notwithstanding its function as a major tourist destination, Vegas is for him “not so much extra-ordinary, as hyper-ordinary.” Quite simply, he writes, it “takes our most commonplace actions and paints them on a bigger canvas: playing, eating, consuming, having fun.” All in all, he opines,

Las Vegas is nothing more than our everyday cityscape. What has become established in the middle of the Mojave Desert: the might of entertainment dictating the flow of life; the organization of the city through shopping malls and amusement parks; non-stop, day and night bustle in the streets and covered walkways; themed architecture that combines commercial seduction with childlike make-believe; the subjugation of city dwellers by an opium of televisual spectacle ... are all things we are already familiar with, and will be induced to become even more accustomed to.

For Bégout, residents of all cities in a sense inhabit Las Vegas.<sup>174</sup>

### *The Carnavalesque*

The question of whether Las Vegas represents the hedonistic climax of civilization to date is certainly up for debate. Nostalgic notions render the past idyllic and the present ridden with an endless array of faults— notions which Las Vegas, with its plethora of historical replicas, ironically relies upon for its sense of glamour. Perhaps, though, the supposedly more refined “way we were” as a society is really the way we *never* were. Dominic Sandbrook implies as much in his comparison of modern-day rock festivals (analogous to Las Vegas as a permanent, norm-inverting festival site) and ancient Roman spectacles (the premise behind Céline’s Caesars Palace venue):

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<sup>174</sup> Bruce Bégout, *Zeropolis: The Experience of Las Vegas*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 12-13.

Then, as now, festivals were big business .... Then, as now, festivals provoked harsh criticism from moral conservatives .... The Roman people, grumbled the poet Juvenal, the *Daily Mail* columnist of his day, had taken a keen interest in serious political affairs once, but now all they cared about was bread and circuses—*panem et circenses*.<sup>175</sup>

Centuries later, in 1193, a writer encouraged visitors to steer clear of London on May Day due to crowds of “stage-players, buffoons, musical girls, druggists, lustful persons [and] extortionists.”<sup>176</sup> Nearly a millennium later, across the ocean in the heart of the Mojave Desert, Las Vegas today is similarly rife with showgirls, drug dealers, and people (not to mention machines) eager to empty your wallet.

In her ostensibly carnivalesque Hollywood-themed show *Celine*, the title showgirl masquerades not just as Celine, no accent but also as an array of characters such as an Ella Fitzgerald-like jazz singer, a Bond girl, Adele, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, and Rose from *Titanic*. For Bégout, though, the masks and costumes of modern-day Las Vegas do not possess the critical function of those in historical contexts. While Las Vegas’ “lawless, creedless nature ... could have led to an unusual political posture, as the first anarchist city in history,” the production of the carnivalesque there is in his view but a means to a capitalist end.<sup>177</sup>

### *Beneath the Surface*

*Las vegas* is Spanish for “the meadows.” But what one finds in Vegas are rows of hotel-entertainment-shopping complexes. Rows of gamblers in front of slot machines.

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<sup>175</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, “Eat, Drink, and Empty Your Pockets,” *New Statesman*, June 20, 2011, 40.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Bégout, 14.

Rows of buskers in the form of strippers and Elvis impersonators. Rows of tourists lined up for whatever free show may be about to start, be it the pirate show at the Mirage, the fountain show at the Bellagio, or the talking statue show at Caesars Palace.

In a metaphysical sense, one could evidently argue that nothing lies beneath superficial Las Vegas, just as many critics are prone to dismiss Céline's music as overprocessed schmaltz. Not all architects have warmed to the populist notion that Las Vegas is worthy of critical consideration set forth by *Learning from Las Vegas*. Neil Leach, for instance, describes Vegas as exhibiting "degree-zero depth" insofar as it is a place "not of architecture but the commodified sign," echoing Baudrillardian conceptions of images as hollow modern-day proxies for reality.<sup>178</sup>

In a literal sense, though, up to a thousand homeless people reside in storm drain tunnels beneath the glitter and glitz of the Strip. A tunnel dweller identified as Cary describes how he ritually subverts the capitalist cycle that engulfs tourists by collecting unclaimed casino tokens and "sneaking into buffets, getting free coffee and soda, stuff like that."<sup>179</sup> Some such homeless people in fact reside directly underneath Céline's opulent venue, Caesars Palace.

## ii. What is Caesars Palace?

### *Hyperreality*

Caesars Palace is an empire on which the sun never sets. Except, that is, in an artificial sense with the simulated sky on the ceilings of the adjacent Forum Shops. The sheer artificiality of the place is no doubt strategic. While nature is unpredictable, artifice

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<sup>178</sup> Neil Leach (1999), quoted in José Gamez, afterword to *Dreaming of Italy: Las Vegas and the Virtual Grand Tour*, 148.

<sup>179</sup> Matthew O'Brien, *Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 2007), 119.

can be molded to facilitate a uniformly ideal consumer experience. Along with nature, the sense of passing time is also largely concealed at Caesars. As Marc Cooper points out, clocks are notably absent in Vegas' entertainment complexes, creating a sense of "spacelessness," "weightlessness," and "placelessness" that positions visitors in a kind of dream space.<sup>180</sup> A sense of heterotopia is particularly palpable at Caesars, where ancient Roman décor surrounds visitors at every turn. Portraits of the stars-in-residence—Céline, Shania, Elton John, and Rod Stewart—anachronistically appear above columned entryways, setting the tone for all that lies within. That is, a carefully constructed hyperreality featuring an opportunistic mix of old and new.

#### *A Palace for the People*

Just as Las Vegas might be conceived of as a Grand Tour for the people<sup>181</sup> and Céline as an artist for the people, founder Jay Sarno conceived of Caesars Palace as a palace for the people. He intentionally omitted the possessive apostrophe in the name because the concept behind the resort was, in his words, "to create a feeling that everybody in the hotel is a Caesar."<sup>182</sup> As Norman Klein cautions, though, "let us never imagine that palaces were democratic sites."<sup>183</sup>

#### *A Parisian Arcade*

For Rebecca Solnit, the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace are a modern iteration of Parisian arcades. Walter Benjamin, in his writing on the arcades, refers to the 1852

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<sup>180</sup> *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History*, DVD, directed by Stephen Ives (Arlington, VA: PBS, 2005).

<sup>181</sup> Franci, 19.

<sup>182</sup> Jay Sarno, quoted in Pete Earley, *Super Casino: Inside the "New" Las Vegas* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001), 71.

<sup>183</sup> Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 345.



*Illustrated Guide to Paris* which describes them as being “lined with the most elegant shops,” forming “a city, even a world, in miniature.” The arcades were thus, in Benjamin’s words, “a cross between a street and an *intérieur*.”<sup>184</sup> As Solnit remarks of the Forum Shops,

With its arched roof painted to look like the sky and recessed lighting that changes from day to twilight and back every twenty minutes or so, this one is more so than Benjamin could have imagined. Its curving ‘streets’ are disorienting and full of distractions: the stores full of clothes, perfumes, knickknacks, a fountain whose backside is a huge tropical fish tank, the famous fountain of nubile gods and goddesses who periodically ‘come to life’ during a simulated thunderstorm with laser lightning snaking across the skylike dome.<sup>185</sup>

In other words, the Forum Shops essentially represent an idealized version of the arcades Benjamin describes. Within this milieu, Céline—whose namesake gift shop and Colosseum venue lie just beyond the Shops—merely represents one of many curiosities to which a *flâneur* might be drawn. She metaphysically stands alongside gourmet chocolates and high-end shoes as a ware to be scrutinized and, hopefully, purchased.

#### *A Scripted Space*

Klein conceives of environments like Caesars Palace as “scripted spaces.”<sup>186</sup> By way of illustration he asks readers to “Imagine walking through a sequence of rooms or alleys.” “The space between,” he points out, “has been scripted for you,” so as to encourage you to imagine yourself as a main character in a story elicited by the script.

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<sup>184</sup> Walter Benjamin (1999), quoted in Solnit, 288.

<sup>185</sup> Solnit, 288.

<sup>186</sup> Klein, 12.

The script's controlling powers are well concealed as the story plays out in your own, seemingly original and organic imagination. For Klein, indeed, free will in this type of environment is but an illusion.<sup>187</sup> With its arcade-like structure and ancient Roman theme, Caesars is by Klein's theory a dictatorial domain.

In actuality, though, Caesars functions as a form of what Klein terms "Happy Imprisonment." Like most casinos on the Strip, it is intentionally designed in such a way that visitors will inevitably lose their sense of direction. But finding your way around and out of Caesars brings with it a hit of ecstasy. In tandem with advances in micro-technology, mazelike environments like Caesars continually evolve to become more "ergonomic," with entrances and exits ever more "thrillingly inscrutable." Klein points to the case of a visitor who describes "getting lost ... every time he goes" and relishing in the fun and "challenge" of the experience.<sup>188</sup>

Enraptured Céline fans similarly revel in being trapped in the scripted realm of her performances, often following the star on tour and returning again and again to see her Vegas show. Britney, a fan in her thirties from Georgia, exemplifies this phenomenon, characterizing her love of attending Céline concerts as a drug-like addiction. As she describes, the "adrenaline rush" that overcame her from the moment she bought tickets to her first Céline concert through the concert itself led to an "instant crash" in the aftermath. Post-show, she remained "hungry for that happiness Celine brought" to her, "but had no way of recreating it." She plunged into such a depression that she drove carelessly on the way home and received a speeding ticket.<sup>189</sup> Evidently,

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<sup>187</sup> Klein, 345.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>189</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 15, 2012.

for this fan, returning from the heavily scripted, ecstasy-inducing realm of the concert to the comparatively unscripted, unexciting “real world” brought with it the challenges of an addict attempting sobriety.

For Britney, the only apparent solution was to buy tickets for another upcoming Céline concert, hiding the expense from her husband. In her words, “After the first ‘hit,’ I needed another one and decided to spare no cost to make sure I had an even greater experience .... Again, I hated when the concert ended, but I left satisfied that my ‘high’ would sustain me.”<sup>190</sup> The fact that the second concert would be essentially the same as the first did not seem to occur to Britney as a drawback. Her inextinguishable craving was simply to relive the scripted experience of the show, just like the Caesars Palace visitor who delights in the experience of getting lost in the same place every time he returns.

### *An Empire*

Caesars Entertainment Corporation, which owns Caesars Palace and an international array of hotel-casinos, is the largest casino entertainment company in the world. Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. liken the developers behind casinos such as Caesars to Hollywood moguls and even the ancient Romans themselves in that they are “big builders whose colossal building projects express an imperial self.”<sup>191</sup> Imperial selves are widely evident in North American culture from film and TV stars who essentially play themselves onscreen to celebrity chef-branded food products at

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<sup>190</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 15, 2012.

<sup>191</sup> Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., “Living like Romans in Las Vegas: The Roman World at Caesars Palace,” in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Pop Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 267.

the grocery store. The sheer physicality of Las Vegas, though—the way in which one can walk through and play a role in its imperial domains—sets it apart.

Cary, the aforementioned storm tunnel-dwelling credit hustler, describes the importance of dressing the part when visiting a casino like Caesars Palace—of meeting the tacit standards for entry into the empire. In preparation for visiting Caesars, he changes his clothes, combs his hair, and shaves. “If you don’t dress nice,” he remarks, “you really stand out. Security can tell the difference between a five-dollar shirt and a five-hundred-dollar shirt.”<sup>192</sup> Despite being a supposed palace for the people, Caesars is evidently not a place just anyone can visit.

Moreover, those who visit do so on the empire’s well-concealed but cold corporate terms. A 1984 security manual for Caesars informs staff of protocol in the case of visitors tripping on the casino floor. Photos are to be taken, and the visitor is to be transported to a car or ambulance. “Be courteous, do not argue,” the manual advises. But do not be too courteous: never “advise injured guests that the hotel will assume payment of any medical expense.” As Klein observes, “This is standard practice at casinos and malls throughout the U.S. Release enough information—smile—but never too much. Camouflage crucial details; make these controls almost impossible to spot.”<sup>193</sup>

To my surprise, though, the opportunity to get a glimpse of these controls was all but handed to me by a mistaken casino employee. Upon arriving at Caesars Palace to interview a Caesars Entertainment executive, I knocked on the only corporate office-type door I could see off of the casino area. A uniformed employee answered. In a hurry and confused, he ushered me in as I explained that I was looking for corporate headquarters.

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<sup>192</sup> O’Brien, 119.

<sup>193</sup> Klein, 349-50.

He had to leave right away, but gave me directions to walk down the hall. I made my way down the narrow hallway and found myself in the nucleus of Caesars, a Casino Operations office filled with computers where, eerily, no employees were to be found. Certain I had been misdirected, I left right away and eventually located corporate headquarters in a completely different area of the Caesars complex. There by contrast I had to sign in, creating a legal written record of my visit, a requirement befitting a corporate empire.

What I fleetingly glimpsed of the Casino Operations department, though, recalled the behind-the-scenes offices I visualized while reading a *Wall Street Journal* piece about how Caesars monitors gamblers' activities. Just as many rulers past and present have monitored citizens' activities as a means of exercising control over them, Caesars employees track customers' behaviour through the Total Rewards loyalty program which utilizes scientifically proven, personalized strategies to entice and ensnare them.<sup>194</sup>

### *Virtual Hollywood*

Jay Sarno's Rome, Malamud and McGuire observe, was "primarily inspired by the material splendor and excesses of the cinematic Rome of Hollywood spectacular films." Caesars Palace, then, "is the Rome of Hollywood's late republic and empire—the Rome of powerful rulers, bread and circuses, and lavish and extravagant displays of wealth and consumption."<sup>195</sup> A larger-than-life star like Céline thus fits seamlessly into the milieu. A female fan from the East Coast snagged a seventh-row seat at one of Céline's Vegas shows and describes the experience of being so close to the star as

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<sup>194</sup> Christina Binkley, "Taking Retailers' Cues, Harrah's Taps into Science of Gambling," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2004.

<sup>195</sup> Malamud and McGuire, 251.

“magical” in the way of cinema or an optical illusion. In her words, “I could hardly believe that the real Celine Dion was in front of me—it felt like I was watching just another video!”<sup>196</sup>

In Klein’s conception, the cinematic quality of a “condensed city” like Caesars Palace lends it a certain necessary sense of innocence. As he explains, “Architainment may rigidly set the path for gamblers, but the excuse is that this show works like a movie. You obey like an audience while you walk through. The views echo camera angles you’ve seen in movies, a pan of the city during the opening credits.”<sup>197</sup> The fact that walking through Caesars makes you feel like the star of a historical epic engenders a false sense of personal control. Caesars specifically calls to mind lavish films like *Cleopatra* (1963). As Klein notes, when Caesars opened in 1966, “Poolside was an ‘Olympic’-sized replica of the baths of Pompeii, where showgirls dressed like Cleopatra greeted guests as if they were Richard Burton.”<sup>198</sup> Though such personalized thematic touches are long gone at Caesars today, a similar atmosphere persists based on the movie set-like décor and its population by superstars like Céline, whose current Vegas show self-reflexively follows a Hollywood theme.

Even Céline’s grand arrival at Caesars to launch the show prominently featured hallmarks of ancient Roman epic cinema from the *mise-en-scène* to the music, as a *Newsweek* piece details:

an unusual throng is building at Las Vegas’s Caesars Palace, vibrating the plaster columns of the porte-cochère. There are white-haired executives flanked by

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<sup>196</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 18, 2012.

<sup>197</sup> Klein, 343.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

publicity personnel; camera-toting tourists jostling with hundreds of off-duty hotel employees; and, naturally, a man dressed as Caesar himself, complete with a phalanx of rent-a-centurions decked in bronze and red feathers. At last, a black Escalade draws up, and Celine Dion, the shimmering French-Canadian headliner, steps onto a rose-strewn red carpet. “Welcome home, Celine!” the hoi polloi yell, as the overture from *Ben-Hur* erupts from hidden speakers.<sup>199</sup>

### *Baroque Art*

The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the 1972 classic suggesting that the seemingly lowbrow structures lining the Strip are worthy of serious architectural consideration, characterize Caesars Palace as a postmodern masterpiece especially recalling Italian Baroque monuments. They describe the front colonnade as “San Pietro-Bernini in plan but Yamasaki in vocabulary and scale” and the blue and gold mosaic work as “Early Christian tomb of Galla Placidia.” “Beyond and above,” they write, “is a slab in Gio Ponti Pirelli-Baroque, and beyond that, in turn, a low wing in Neo-classical Motel Moderne.” They proceed to compare Caesars’ parking lot to Saint Peter’s Square in Vatican City. “Among the parked cars,” they observe, are “five fountains rather than the two of Carlo Maderno,” as though Caesars’ architects were attempting to outdo the Baroque master. They further remark that the area around the porte-cochère features “Gian de Bologna’s *Rape of the Sabine Women* and statues of Venus and David, with

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<sup>199</sup> Tony Dokoupil and Ramin Setoodeh, “Rich Vegas, Poor Vegas,” *The Daily Beast*, March 13, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/03/13/rich-vegas-poor-vegas.html> (accessed March 12, 2013).

slight anatomical exaggerations,”<sup>200</sup> reflecting the theme of the body as spectacle widely manifest in Vegas.

For Klein, writing three decades and many renovations later, Caesars Palace remains analogous to Baroque art, drawing on such characteristic techniques as *trompe l’oeil*. Tiepolo blue—a shade “between a robin’s egg and a showgirl’s eyes” featured in the artist’s famed Würzburg Residenz frescoes—was copied for ceilings in the Forum Shops, the Bellagio, and the Venetian. A “false Italian blue sky (over a nonexistent Mediterranean harbor)” thus graces some of Vegas’ most popular tourist areas, allowing tourists to imagine they are vacationing in the posh Riviera.<sup>201</sup>

As Jean Baudrillard explains, with *trompe l’oeil* “we are bewitched by the spell of the missing dimension” which “establishes the space of seduction and becomes a source of vertigo.”<sup>202</sup> More specifically, Klein describes the effect of *trompe l’oeil* on viewers as a “highly compressed story” spanning “three acts in a few seconds”:

Act I: hyperreal first reading of the image;

Act II: dissolve of the image into a fractal of many surfaces, called the “moment of wonder”;

Act III: rumination afterward, leading to “revelation,” as in faith at the end of a pilgrimage.<sup>203</sup>

Strikingly, the process that Klein describes is the same type of experience fans report having upon seeing Céline in the flesh. Andrea, a fan from Florida, describes her

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<sup>200</sup> Venturi, Brown, and Izenour (1972), quoted in Dörte Kuhlmann, “Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine,” in *Stripping Las Vegas: A Contextual Review of Casino Resort Architecture*, ed. Karin Jaschke and Silke Ötsch (London: Verso, 2003), 174.

<sup>201</sup> Klein, 63.

<sup>202</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1990), quoted in Klein, 63.

<sup>203</sup> Klein, 63.



brief meeting with Céline at the premiere of *Celine: Through the Eyes of the World* in just such a fashion. Her initial sense of starstruck confusion ultimately gave way to newfound faith in the superstar:

It was such a magical and surreal moment. She came out and looked gorgeous in her Alexander McQueen black dress accompanied with fabulous shoes and sparkly necklace. My sister and I were the first fans to be approached by her and have her sign a poster board. I was in such awe that I had no idea what else to say to her besides “Can you please sign this?” which of course she did. Then I had the strength to say you look beautiful or gorgeous... I can’t even remember what I said to her exactly but of course it wasn’t much because she was greeting other fans. Although it was such a short moment in time my sister and I were in complete star struck mode. Meeting her for just a split second made this idol come to life for me. Knowing that she was truly beautiful, kind and professional solidified the idea of Celine, this global icon, into my reality and my idea of her.

Celine no longer was a fantastical creature but someone who walks amongst us.<sup>204</sup>

A male fan from Italy shared a similar experience with me. When he saw Céline perform live in Milan in 2008, he was incredulous at “how that voice came out from a real body made of flesh like mine is.” Reflecting on the concert, he expresses how he “realized in that moment that Céline exists in real life.”<sup>205</sup>

### **iii. The Colosseum at Caesars Palace**

#### *History*

When Caesars Palace first opened in 1966, its major entertainment venue was the

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<sup>204</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, July 20, 2012.

<sup>205</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

800-seat Circus Maximus showroom, featuring the production *Rome Swings* starring crooner Andy Williams.<sup>206</sup> Circus Maximus closed in 2000 and was replaced by the Colosseum, often referred to as “The House that Céline Built” due to the fact that it was specially constructed for her first Las Vegas residency show beginning in 2003. *A New Day...* ran for five years, was attended by nearly three million people, and became one of the top-grossing shows in music history with over \$400 million in profits from a total of 723 shows.<sup>207</sup> Céline was recently hailed by *Newsweek* as “the biggest act since Elvis,” and her current show, *Celine*, is “selling stronger than the first run.”<sup>208</sup>

### *Outside*

Outside the theatre—which is actually inside, in the Forum Casino—a sea of slot machines and clouds of cigarette smoke greet showgoers. The slot machines look and sound a bit like children’s toys, projecting vibrant colours and enticing noises into the atmosphere. The gamblers in front of them similarly appear child-like, completely mesmerized by the amusements on offer at their respective machines. As Klein describes, some machines feature “animated pirate raids, showboats, magic wands, palm readers, fortune-tellers,” and even “realistic” showgirls serving up come-ons. Others are based on popular television shows, movies, and cartoon characters like *Wheel of Fortune*, *Indiana Jones*, and Popeye. The result is that a diversity of film and television stars are also “slot stars.”<sup>209</sup> For instance, images of Audrey Hepburn, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Alex Trebec are respectively emblazoned on the *Breakfast at*

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<sup>206</sup> “Opening Night of Caesars Palace,” *Las Vegas Sun*, August 5, 1966.

<sup>207</sup> Stephanie Schaffer, “Celine Dion and A New Day... Cast to Make Final Curtain Call Tonight,” GollinHarris Press Release, December 15, 2007.

<sup>208</sup> Robin Leach, “Celine Dion ‘the Biggest Act Since Elvis,’ *Newsweek* Says,” *Las Vegas Sun*, September 14, 2011.

<sup>209</sup> Klein, 339.

*Tiffany's*, *Sex and the City*, and *Jeopardy!* slot machines. One wonders, indeed, why there is not yet a Céline slot machine. Michael Jackson has one, complete with a surround sound system to play his hit songs. To date, there are an array of Caesars casino tokens emblazoned with Céline's image.

Also outside the theatre are vendors hawking \$30 show programs and an official merchandise store proffering Céline (and some Elton, Rod, and Shania) merchandise. Venturing inside, I survey the branded wares ranging from CDs and DVDs to postcards and magnets to sunglasses, jewelry, and nail files. I ask the cashier if he ever grows tired of hearing Céline's music, which plays nonstop in the store while she is in residence. He says no, it simply fits the theme of the store. What else are they going to play, he asks—AC/DC? He then begins to reminisce about his previous career as a musician, and tells me about a documentary that is being made about a music scene he was part of in Texas. Handing me a business card, he entreats me to visit his website and see who he used to be.

Slot machines, smoky air, and branded merchandise store aside, the atmosphere in front of the Colosseum almost suggests a community theatre, at least compared to the massive arenas that a star of Céline's stature would typically perform at. Arrive early enough and you will see performers from the show wandering about, ID tags strung around their necks. That intimate vibe falls to pieces, however, when you enter the Colosseum itself, a large theatre seating 4,298 audience members.

#### *Inside*

On the way in, showgoers must clear security, passing through metal detectors and surrendering all purses and bags for physical inspection. The scene closely resembles

an airport security line-up. Cameras and other recording devices are not allowed inside the venue (yet, as evidenced by countless YouTube videos of the show, this policy is not always enforced). The environment further recalls an airport in that it is readily apparent that people have come from all over the world to see the show. The amount of French one hears, for example, is remarkable, reflecting Céline's immense Francophone fan base. In fact, Air Canada increases the number of flights between Québec and Vegas when Céline is performing specifically to accommodate Québécois fans making the pilgrimage.<sup>210</sup> Pre-show announcements are in English and French, not so unusual to my ears as a Canadian but certainly unexpected at an American venue.

Many pop stars have gone ancient in performances, from Michael Jackson (whose 1992 music video for "Remember the Time" is set in ancient Egypt) to Kylie Minogue (whose 2011 Aphrodite Tour was set in ancient Greece) to Britney Spears (who masqueraded as Cleopatra on her 2011 Femme Fatale Tour). But what does it mean for Céline to perform inside an ersatz ancient Rome—a faux Colosseum, to be exact? In comparison to an arena, the ancient Rome-tinged concert hall feels intimate and elegant. One wouldn't be surprised if a star soprano and an orchestra were to appear onstage. They do, in a sense, in this show with the diva Céline—who closely resembles emblematic soprano Maria Callas—accompanied by a 31-piece orchestra and band.

### *Showtime*

*Celine* is framed in global terms by a brief film that tracks key events in the star's life and career since her first Colosseum residency. Between the end of *A New Day...* and the start of the current show, she connected with fans all over the world on her Taking

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<sup>210</sup> Marie-Joelle Parent, "Celine's Star Power Just What Vegas Needs," *Toronto Sun*, February 28, 2011.

Chances Tour (2008-2009) with stops in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. The film also showcases intimate family moments such as a conversation between Céline, her husband René, and her son René-Charles at the end of the tour about her future plans. She talks emotionally of the opportunity to stay at home with her son for a while. The film culminates with scenes surrounding the birth of her new twins. The cinematic journey implicitly carries over into the realm of the show, with the word “Tonight” flashing onscreen as the curtains open.

Céline appears alone onstage in an angelic-looking bejeweled white evening gown, launching into a cover of Journey’s “Open Arms” (1981). The lyrics suggest a metaphysical embrace of the audience: “Here I am with open arms / Hoping you’ll see what your love means to me.” The lyrics are also self-reflexive in that they allude to her open-book relationship with fans. She sings that she has “nothing to hide,” and entreats the audience to “believe what [she] say[s].” This is very much the message she projects all throughout the show, sharing family anecdotes and expressing heartfelt gratitude to her fans for their support of her dream. Even after the show, the profuse expressions of gratitude continue with a thank-you video message e-mailed to attendees.

Early on in the show, Céline talks about her family almost to the point of tabloid-style oversharing. She describes how cute her newborn twins are, and relates that her eldest son just started middle school and is “having a ball” (with his love of all types of sports ending in “-ball”). She expresses how happy she is to have the opportunity to be both a mother and a performer. Being in Vegas, she says, is a dream for her—and, she jokes, an even bigger dream for her husband, a notorious gambler. She thanks the audience for their love.

Love is, indeed, at the centre of Céline's show. *Love*, a Beatles-themed Cirque du Soleil production at the Mirage, is another currently popular Vegas attraction. But the love of *Love* is theatrical and somewhat distant, bound up in complex acrobatics, dance moves, and canned music. The love one experiences at Céline's show is ostensibly much more personal and palpable. As critic Chuck Taylor describes the experience, "once you see Celine Dion live, you never forget it. It's not a concert; it's a shared experience."<sup>211</sup> A communion, even, many fans would no doubt say. John Meglen, President and Co-CEO of AEG Live/Concerts West (the production company behind Colosseum residency shows), is adamant about the importance of bringing living, breathing stars to Vegas. "I don't want to do the Kiss show without Kiss," he remarks, referring to a planned Cirque du Soleil-style Kiss revue.<sup>212</sup>

Céline follows her performance of "Open Arms" with a rendition of her first English single, "Where Does My Heart Beat Now" (1990). A clip of a young Jay Leno introducing an early televised performance of the song draws laughs from the audience. He foretells her future fame, remarking that we are bound to hear a lot more from Céline. And indeed, we have—her dream came true. As Céline launches into the song, several small screens descend from the ceiling, showing images of her at different stages of her career. Among them are numerous ugly duckling-type early-career images predating the makeover she underwent in preparation for her Anglophone career. The performance is in a sense like a television makeover show: the audience is witness to the before and after, which side by side reveal an awe-inducing contrast.

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<sup>211</sup> Taylor, e-mail interview.

<sup>212</sup> Mike Weatherford, "AEG Live President Stands By Star Policy," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 21, 2010.

With this performance, Céline tacitly suggests that the spectator, too, has the power to effect a spectacular transformation in his or her own life. The decidedly unflattering photos of young Céline emphasize that, though a global superstar, she is just another human being. In other words, she could be *you*. Like many pop stars, Céline is emblematic of fairytale ideals, most prominently among them this notion that dreams really can and do come true. A twentysomething fan named Alicia illustrates Céline's role as a source of inspiration to fans, writing of how Céline stirred up in her "an old childhood dream ... to be a singer."<sup>213</sup>

Yet fans' perceptions of Céline as perfect and themselves as imperfect can pose a psychological barrier in their attempts to realize such dreams. As Alicia laments, "If I had a 10<sup>th</sup> of her vocal talent and passion/fire/confidence, I'd be set!"<sup>214</sup> The idol thus in many cases remains the idol, with the spectator resigned—however contentedly—to spectating. Céline's superstar persona indeed involves a delicate balance of appearing relatable to fans and maintaining a diva-esque distance from them, masked as it may be by her warm public persona. Céline is "not the typical 'Diva,'" Australian fan Lisa insists.<sup>215</sup>

Attending the show multiple times, however, reveals some of this cool distance. The first time you hear Céline's seemingly spontaneous and heartfelt monologues and jokes, they are quite touching, rare as it is for a pop star to talk so much over the course of a performance. Attend the show again, though, and you will likely hear some of the same monologues and jokes repeated, perhaps even word for word. As John Nelson,

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<sup>213</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

Vice-President of AEG Live Las Vegas remarks, Céline's jokes are incredibly clever in that they tap into widely relatable (albeit stereotypical) life issues, such as a husband who gambles too much.<sup>216</sup> But experiencing their repetition reinforces the extent to which Céline's show is choreographed like any other pop concert. Her monologues and jokes are part of the act just as the costumes, sets, and props are.

After "Where Does My Heart Beat Now," Céline moves through a series of smash hits: "Because You Loved Me" (1996) followed by a medley of "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" (1996) and "The Power of Love" (1993). With these essentially obligatory performances out of the way, she moves away from her own repertory to a degree unexpected for a star of her stature. Slipping in and out of myriad identities, she covers a diversity of other stars' hits, a gesture at once democratic, colonialist, and coolly shrewd. However humbly, she takes these other songs—many remarkably far removed from her typical repertoire—and makes them her own. To fill the Colosseum each evening, she must transcend her own identity as an adult contemporary artist, branching out to appeal to audiences beyond her own fan base. She must become globally appealing: a diplomatic diva absolutely devoted to pleasing her audience.

As Nelson puts it, performances by Céline, Elton, Shania, and Rod at Caesars are "destination shows," enough in themselves to attract visitors from all over to Las Vegas.<sup>217</sup> But clearly much strategizing goes into making them that way. Almost two-thirds of the Céline fans I interviewed were female, yet a "destination show" must cross gender and numerous other divides in order to succeed. As Nelson explains, women are known to be the primary decision-makers among Vegas visitors, meaning that a woman

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<sup>216</sup> John Nelson, personal interview, Las Vegas, NV, June 26, 2012.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.



is likely to select shows to attend and perhaps bring along her husband.<sup>218</sup> As Jason Gastwirth of Caesars Entertainment points out, many men wind up also loving Céline after attending her show.<sup>219</sup> The fact that it spans musical territory from eighties rock (with a Journey cover) to jazz (with an Ella Fitzgerald cover) to movie soundtracks (with James Bond, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Titanic* theme songs) to R&B (with a Stevie Wonder duet) to French *chansons* (with a Jacques Brel cover) to contemporary hits (with an Adele cover) no doubt renders Céline palatable across gender, generational, and geocultural borders.

Reflecting on the general state of the music industry, Nelson observes that today's up-and-coming musicians face significant challenges in building their careers, given that a panoply of music is just a click away for most consumers.<sup>220</sup> Even for the global superstar Céline, though, it seems to have been necessary to explore songs and genres beyond her own domain in order to retain a captive audience in the wake of *A New Day...*, her previous, more canonical Vegas show.

After the medley of “It’s All Coming Back to Me Now” and “The Power of Love,” Céline launches into a cover of “(If You Can’t Sing It) You’ll Have to Swing It (Mr. Paganini)” (1936), complete with an imitation of Ella Fitzgerald’s trademark scat singing. The intimate way in which the performance is staged—with Céline accompanied by a small band instead of the full orchestra featured in the opening set—to some extent makes Céline seem like any other jazz club performer. Images of Fitzgerald appearing on screens beside the stage, however, make the jazz club atmosphere feel a bit forced.

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<sup>218</sup> Nelson, personal interview.

<sup>219</sup> Jason Gastwirth, personal interview, Las Vegas, NV, June 27, 2012.

<sup>220</sup> Nelson, personal interview.

Céline then takes a sharp detour from the jazz club, proceeding to cover Billy Joel's "Lullabye (Goodnight, My Angel)" (1993). She prefaces the song by telling the audience that as a child growing up in a large, loving family she always understood the love of a child for a parent, but did not understand the love of a parent for a child until she herself became a mother. This love, she proclaims, knows no limits, and is in her opinion perfectly captured by "Lullabye." During her performance of the song, a montage of very intimate family images appears onscreen behind her, extensions of the behind-the-scenes footage she shares in documentaries like *Celine: Through the Eyes of the World* (2010) and *Celine: 3 Boys and a New Show* (2011). The audience again receives privileged access to her private life: Céline the dressed-down mother with her sons, husband, and other relatives. This sense of intimacy with the audience, however constructed, leads fans such as Andrea from Miami to feel like Céline's "best friend."<sup>221</sup> On the flipside, Céline's oversharing provides fertile ground for criticism. Another fan, the aspiring singer Alicia, laments that Céline's commitment to her children has hindered her career momentum, bluntly remarking, "I wish she'd never had kids."<sup>222</sup>

After "Lullabye," Céline briefly returns to her own oeuvre, belting out the passionate love song "The Reason" (1997). She introduces the song in terms likely to incite broad interest, pointing out that it was produced by George Martin, whom she says "brought us some of the Beatles' greatest music." Céline thereby layers the star power of one of the most beloved bands of all time on top of her own in a kind of parody and pastiche of musical identities.

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<sup>221</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, July 20, 2012.

<sup>222</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 21, 2012.

Another figure in the show's postmodern collage of musical and cultural touchstones is James Bond. Céline's medley of Bond theme songs features Shirley Bassey's "Goldfinger" (1964), Carly Simon's "Nobody Does It Better" (1977), and Paul McCartney & Wings' "Live and Let Die" (1973). All the songs are from periods distant enough that Céline can make them her own while also associating herself with the globally beloved Bond, the star character of the second highest-grossing film franchise of all time.<sup>223</sup>

Céline then launches into a couple of virtual duets. First, she sings the popular standard "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?" from the 1982 romantic dramedy *Best Friends* as a duet with none other than herself. A hologram of Céline first appears onstage and launches into the song, with the real Céline appearing offstage in the aisle moments later to join in. Waves of confusion pass through the audience. Many gasp at seeing two Célines at once, not having realized that the first one to appear was a hologram. Some wonder aloud, "Which one is the real Céline?" As this optical illusion underscores, superstars straddle the boundaries between the real and the unreal.

Céline, however, always tries to make herself seem as real as possible. The concept of singing a duet with oneself seems in theory rather narcissistic. But Céline's duet with herself seems almost the opposite. Céline's hologram is shockingly unflattering. Technology typically serves to enhance rather than detract from stars' looks, yet the hologram shows a decidedly "made-under" version of the star. Wearing a Victorian-style high-necked beige dress complete with a brooch, hologram Céline appears far older and less charismatic than corporeal Céline singing among audience

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<sup>223</sup> "Harry Potter Becomes Highest-Grossing Film Franchise," *The Guardian*, September 11, 2007.

members in a Grecian white gown. One even wonders if the hologram was intended to serve as a foil to the real Céline, as if to underscore that she is more beautiful in real life than any representation of her—a person essentially made up of images in the public eye—could be.

Throughout the duet, the real Céline mingles extensively with audience members in the front rows, touching their hands, looking into their eyes, and so forth as if a religious figure bestowing blessings. As the virtual duet comes to a close, she declares: “I assure you, I am not an illusion.” Her fans agree: as Jill from Ohio puts it, “what you see is what you get” with Céline.<sup>224</sup>

Céline bids the hologram goodbye and then jokingly asks the audience, “do you know how long it took me to teach her that song?” She then becomes even more gossipy, making fun of how much the “duet partner” likes to talk, prattling on about dinner plans and shoes. As Céline remarks, “I don’t know how he lives with her.” These are all in fact self-deprecating jokes about Céline herself and her well-known quirks. By poking fun at herself in this way, Céline assures the audience that she does not buy into her own hype. She has quirks, but she does not need gossip columnists to caricature her: she can do it herself.

Céline’s second virtual duet is with Stevie Wonder. They perform his 1985 hit “Overjoyed” with Wonder and his piano appearing in hologram form. Céline thus brings yet another global superstar into the realm of her show not just metaphysically as before but essentially physically insofar as Wonder has a visual presence. The two stars diplomatically declare their love for each other at the end of the duet, in the process

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<sup>224</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 15, 2012.

forging a bond between their two personae not to mention their respective target demographics.

The show then takes another turn away from spectacle back to more intimate territory. Céline sits on the edge of the stage near the audience along with her guitarist André for a cover of Janis Ian's very personal but widely relatable hit "At Seventeen" (1975). Before launching into the song, Céline chats about how it feels so nice to slow things down for a bit and be close to the audience. "I like to be close to you," she says. The song's lyrics convey the heart-wrenching emotions associated with being an awkward, unattractive teenage girl. Hearing a glamorous superstar sing of being an "ugly duckling" complete with a "ravaged face" and a lack of "social grace" is at first surprising. But then one recalls the ugly duckling-type images of Céline herself projected during "Where Does My Heart Beat Now." Céline's lament for "all the valentines that never came" thus gains credibility.

One reviewer critiques the show for its apparent use of family photos and songs like this "friendless ugly-duckling '70s anthem" as a "shortcut to any personal bond with fans," a hollow substitute for any real "psychological insight."<sup>225</sup> Nonetheless, Céline is a believable ugly duckling-turned-glamorous superstar. At least when she wants to be. In yet another twist of identities, after "At Seventeen" she proceeds to perform her Disney classic "Beauty and the Beast" as a duet with one of her back-up singers, adopting the role of Beauty to his Beast.

With the next song, Jacques Brel's classic "Ne me quitte pas" (1959), Céline takes on the persona of a French *chansonnier*. As Ryan Edwardson observes, while

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<sup>225</sup> Mike Weatherford, "Celine Dion Show a Slick, Fresh Celebration of Live Musicianship," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 20, 2012.

Céline has benefited immeasurably from singing in English, she has also “found her authenticity as a Québécois called into question” as a result.<sup>226</sup> The moment she says she will be performing a French song, effusive cheers break out among Francophone segments of the audience, seemingly joyfully reassured of her commitment to them. Céline also makes sure to inform the audience that the song is a classic in English as well, entitled “If You Go Away.” She additionally expresses that it is such an emotional song that she sometimes finds it difficult to perform. As she sings, her performance is projected on a screen behind her in black and white, effecting a cinematic aesthetic. Tears are streaming down her face by the end, but these are Old Hollywood tears—controlled, crystalline droplets. The fact that these same tears pour down her cheeks show after show underscores the extent to which they are a planned dramatic effect, just as her jokes are calculated comedic effects.

Indeed, this show is Céline’s job. As Nelson emphasizes, income from live shows is key for today’s stars,<sup>227</sup> no doubt a reason why Céline and her fellow Caesars residents were willing to sign up for such extensive performance runs. As Elizabeth, a fan from London, admirably observes, “not many people can perform live and do it several times a week” as Céline does.<sup>228</sup> But more than that, like the proverbial “everyone else,” Céline commutes from her Lake Las Vegas home to work by car. She does her own make-up before each show. She also works overtime, meeting with Make-A-Wish children, Caesars’ VIP guests, and others before and after shows.

Céline follows up her emotionally charged French performance with a cover of an

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<sup>226</sup> Ryan Edwardson, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 177.

<sup>227</sup> Nelson, personal interview.

<sup>228</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 23, 2012.

English song of a similarly sombre mood, Eric Carmen’s “All By Myself” (1975), which she herself topped charts with in the nineties. The sense of heartbreak continues with her cover of Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” (2010). Just as Céline “loves” Stevie Wonder, she also conveniently “loves” superstar-of-the-moment Adele, expressing admiration for her “amazing” abilities before launching into the hit song. Whether Céline can effectively render these kinds of emotionally wrought songs is up for debate. Can a star actively advertise having a perfect family life—complete with loving parents, siblings, children, and a longtime husband—and at the same time sing convincingly of cruel heartbreak?

In any case, Céline does not dare end the show on such a dark note. A key feature of her widely appealing public persona is that she always puts what a female fan from South Carolina calls a “positive, uplifting” spin on everything.<sup>229</sup> Many of her songs do this internally almost to the point of irrationality. For example, one might assume that “Where Does My Heart Beat Now” is a song about heartbreak based on its title and first few minutes of lovelorn lyrics. But the very last moments of the song see Céline, in a sort of coda, singing of the joy and healing that comes with finding love again. Apparently, “Hearts are made to last / Till the end of time.” The overall structure of Céline’s show follows the same trajectory: calm invariably follows the storm, at this point in the show in the form of “Love Can Move Mountains” (her 1992 hit) and “River Deep – Mountain High” (Ike and Tina Turner’s 1966 hit, also popularized by Céline).

Céline closes the show with her signature song, “My Heart Will Go On” from *Titanic* (1997). The song may seem awash in tragedy with its theme of lost love, but the positive twist is that the heart will, of course, go on. Céline performs the song on a

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<sup>229</sup> E-mail interview with a Céline Dion fan, June 16, 2012.

podium as rain pours down around her, as though she were a statue at the centre of a fountain. The rain is controlled and crystalline, like her earlier Old Hollywood tears. The effect of this classic song on the audience is one more of ecstasy than melancholy. A woman next to me at one show repeated “Oh my God” aloud at least five times as Céline launched into the song, as if in a trance.



## VI. Shania in Las Vegas

### i. What is “Country?”

#### *A Fantasy*

Shania arrived at Caesars Palace on horseback on November 14, 2012 to launch her two-year residency. The Strip was closed to traffic to make way for her grand entrance. In a city of slick black limousines, the shiny black horse on which she rode announced that she was “different.” More specifically, her equine accessory suggested that she was “natural,” at least in the Las Vegas sense of the term. Shania embodies the rural fantasy that is country music, in contrast to Céline’s strike-it-rich tale of upward mobilization. Both are rags-to-riches stars, but the former arrives like a mythical heroine on horseback where the latter unapologetically arrives in a chauffeured Escalade.<sup>230</sup>

Cleopatra once rolled out of a carpet to meet Caesar, and indeed, in keeping with its ancient Roman theme, grand entrances are common at Caesars Palace. In this respect, Malamud and McGuire observe, Caesars draws not only on the aesthetics of classic historical epic films but also on the strategies of the elaborate movie palaces that showcased them in the first half of the twentieth century. These so-called “dream palaces” were “immersive, luxurious, simulated environment[s] that encouraged fantasy and identification with the glamorous stars on the screen.”<sup>231</sup> Jay Sarno, Caesars’ founder, adopted this kind of fantastical approach to enhancing the experience for visitors of his hotel-casino, one which continues to be felt today in the fantastical promotion of Shania’s show.

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<sup>230</sup> Tony Dokoupil and Ramin Setoodeh, “Rich Vegas, Poor Vegas,” *The Daily Beast*, March 13, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/03/13/rich-vegas-poor-vegas.html> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>231</sup> Malamud and McGuire, 251.

Just as film premieres at the likes of Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood would often feature employees costumed according to the film's theme, Sarno marked Caesars' opening with "employees dressed as Roman goddesses, gladiators, centurions, and Caesar and Cleopatra to greet and serve guests."<sup>232</sup> Today, comparable themed festivities mark the launch of Colosseum residencies. Whether the theme is "ancient Rome" or "British" (Elton and Rod) or "diva" (Céline) or "country" (Shania) is inconsequential. Caesars can execute any theme with equal panache, proving the interchangeability and intrinsic emptiness of each theme in itself.

With portraits of Shania, Céline, Elton, and Rod affixed above the main entrance, Caesars also exhibits the visual rhetoric of a movie theatre. Instead of entering into a purely cinematic realm, though, guests enter the symbolic home of Julius Caesar and these stars. Sightings of actors costumed as Cleopatra, Caesar, and Marc Antony roaming about the complex are common. But walking through the casino and the Forum Shops knowing that the stars have been there, or could even be behind the Colosseum's doors rehearsing or performing, heightens the fantasy quotient significantly on contemporary cultural terms. Evidently, despite pretenses to the contrary demonstrated by Shania's horseback arrival at Caesars, the notion of "country" is itself a fantastical construction, one among many mobilized at Caesars. Horses are to sedans as Céline is to Shania, in that all essentially amount to brand ambassadors.

Moreover, the fantastically uplifting nature of Shania's music fits in perfectly at Caesars, mirroring the unremittingly positive light in which the hotel-casino casts ancient Rome. Through the metaphorical exclamation marks of its flashy décor, Caesars conceals

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<sup>232</sup> Malamud and McGuire, 263.

the dark side of ancient Rome, a side that even Hollywood films are willing to broach. As Malamud and McGuire explain, films from *Quo Vadis* (1951) to *Ben-Hur* (1959) “present Roman corruption and decadence as ultimately destructive,” while Caesars one-sidedly celebrates and urges visitors to partake in the decadent aspect of the civilization. The “triumph of Judaeo-Christian values over Roman decadence popular in the 1950s cinematic representations of the Roman world” has no place in this milieu,<sup>233</sup> just as mournful country heartbreak ballads in the vein of Patsy Cline’s “I Fall to Pieces” (1961) and George Jones’ “He Stopped Loving Her Today” (1980) have no place in Shania’s oeuvre.

### *A Mask*

Shania is far from a typical Nashville country star. As a crossover artist, she negotiates the boundaries between the personae of cowgirl and pop diva. The very fluidity with which she moves back and forth between these two identities suggests the extent to which they—like the fantastical themes of Caesars’ various festivities—are constructed and therefore interchangeable. Fittingly, costumes are a central component of Shania’s brand as a pop star, being inextricably tied to some of the most memorable moments of her career.

Shania’s Vegas show reflects this. Her signature music video costumes designed by Marc Bouwer are a main attraction, displayed in cases in front of the venue and in new iterations onstage during many numbers. From one perspective, many of the costumes are far more glamorous than country music’s down-home aesthetic framework typically allows for. But from another perspective, masks, costumes, and props are as central to the

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<sup>233</sup> Malamud and McGuire, 262.

traditional aesthetic of country music as they are to that of any other popular music genre. Where Tim McGraw sports a seemingly naturalized cowboy hat and plaid shirt, Shania may wear an overtly showy sequined catsuit and over-the-knee leather boots. But both ensembles are worn by design.

Richard A. Peterson addresses this issue in *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. He argues that country music is ‘authentic fakery’ in the Ecoian sense,<sup>234</sup> a label that one might equally apply to Tim McGraw and Shania, not to mention Céline and Las Vegas itself. Referring to the ideology of French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, Peterson explains that the paradoxical notion of “fabricating authenticity” underscores the extent to which “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered.”<sup>235</sup> Authenticity, then, is a fluid rather than fixed concept, one which “no authority is in a position to dictate.”<sup>236</sup> Except, of course, the collective authority that is the buying public. As Peterson explains, commercial considerations determine country music’s brand of authenticity, wielding as much power as in any other industrialized genre of music:

As is the case in other aspects of commercial popular culture, creative people propose ideas (be they for recorded music, movies, videos, magazines, or computer games), the industry adapts them in the process of putting a product on the market, and the public chooses some while rejecting others. The entrepreneurs, in turn, try to understand why certain offerings have been accepted

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<sup>234</sup> See Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harvest Books, 1986).

<sup>235</sup> Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

and others rejected in order to create more that are as much like the successful ones as possible.<sup>237</sup>

For Peterson, then, the nostalgic pastoral ideals expressed in country music are part of a lost past that never was. They are madeleines that never were, to use Marcel Proust's imagery. And in the music industry, they function as interchangeable masks, just like Shania's dual cowgirl and pop diva identities.

Peterson also illuminates the trajectory from aesthetic formation to aesthetic consecration in the music industry. As he observes, "The disjunction between demand and supply is widest in the early days of a genre before its aesthetic has been consolidated."<sup>238</sup> That is, in George Melly's words, before "what began as a revolt against social and aesthetic conventions has become mere style."<sup>239</sup> Jazz crossed this line in the late 1920s, with country and rock following in the fifties, as the organic ideas behind these genres metamorphosed into manufacturable masks.<sup>240</sup>

Masks run through North American culture unchecked in a panoply of forms physical and metaphysical. Yet if the role of masks everywhere from Disneyland to The Venetian in Las Vegas is any evidence, masks are ironically considered mysterious and outré in North America today. At the Italian-themed resort hotel and casino just across the street from Caesars Palace, they function as pure attention-grabbing spectacle. Free daily *Carnevale di Venezia*-inspired festivities draw crowds, showcasing colourfully costumed and masked singers and circus performers. 'Authentic' hand-painted masks and costumes are, of course, available for purchase in The Venetian's own St. Mark's Square.

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<sup>237</sup> Peterson, 6.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>239</sup> George Melly (1970), quoted in Peterson, 6.

<sup>240</sup> Peterson, 5-6.

The elaborate window display of one shop selling carnival outfits features a wigged dummy wearing a frilled eighteenth century-style dress, black with gold trim and paired with a matching fan and mask. A wide-eyed passerby gazes in awe and remarks to me, “Wow, that would be neat for Halloween!” Las Vegas, though, is in a sense perpetual Halloween. Across the street at Caesars Palace, the situation is little different despite the lack of specific focus on masks as a tourist commodity. Caesar and his entourage greet visitors, and Roman-themed merchandise is on offer in the gift shops.

Clearly, the degree of mystique associated with masking specifically and costuming generally is culturally contingent. Shania sports a pink plaid shirt with cowboy boots to match as flashy accessories in her Vegas show, while bona fide cowboys in the American South don plaid shirts and cowboy hats as a matter of course. Similarly, the eighteenth-century Italians that performers at The Venetian parody wore masks as part of their daily lives. As James H. Johnson explains, masks were simply the norm in Venice at the time, utilized “well beyond carnival season for occasions that were far from festive.” Just like a cowboy hat in Alberta or Tennessee, the mask was in Venice “an accepted article of clothing ... simple, cheap, and easily had,” as opposed to “a luxury item or an exotic fashion ... worn to be mysterious or provocative.” As one 1730 visitor relates, “People go in masks to take the Air, as well as to Plays and Balls, and ’tis the favaurite Pleasure both of the Grandees and the Community.”<sup>241</sup>

But centuries later, across the ocean in the heart of the Mojave Desert, Las Vegas today glorifies masks as a form of entertainment. And Shania, in her constant oscillation between cowgirl and pop diva personae complete with complementary props and

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<sup>241</sup> James H. Johnson, *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 49.

costumes, is a natural object of attention there. Functionally speaking, the buskers along the Strip outfitted as Elvis, showgirls, Disney characters, and the like are little different, engaging the sheer power of costumery to attract tourists and tips for photos.

It is easy to critique Shania—the first country star to fully exploit MTV as a means for flashy visual presentation of both herself and her songs<sup>242</sup>—for apparently being more surface than substance. This is especially the case due to her association with country music as a genre in which ‘authenticity’ is purportedly paramount. As Steve Earle once remarked of Shania’s act, “That’s not country music—that’s lap-dancing.”<sup>243</sup> But ultimately, even “stripped down” genres like country are but masks to be worn by musicians. The genre thus has a natural place in Vegas, whether in the form of Shania’s *Still the One* spectacle at Caesars, Faith Hill and Tim McGraw’s intimate *Soul2Soul* show at The Venetian, or Garth Brooks’ bare-staged acoustic show at Encore.

#### *A Mirror*

An elaborate mirror I encountered at a typically gimmicky Vegas hotel featured a small embedded television, so that one would look in the mirror only to have television shows looking back. This mirror functions in the way French columnist and dramatist Étienne de Jouy argues that theatre does, as a reflection of society. As he wrote in 1816,

The theater is neither a school nor a portrait of manners, but it can be considered [society’s] mirror in the sense that it is the place where [people] are concentrated and reflected. There you see the play of passions, prejudices and public opinion most clearly. The choice of works to be performed most often, the manner in

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<sup>242</sup> The Canadian Press, “Shania Twain Gets Standing Ovarions in Las Vegas Return,” December 3, 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/story/2012/12/02/music-shania-vegas.html> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>243</sup> Steve Earle, quoted in Potter, 73.

which one listens, the type of pleasure or discomfort that the mass of spectators feels most readily, the lines most vigorously applauded, the silliness mocked, the moods one shows at the theater, the behavior one assumes, the people with whom one goes: all of these are so many observations to be collected—observations according to which, without the slightest knowledge of events or incidents, one could form a complete picture of national habits.<sup>244</sup>

If what de Jouy argues is true, then country music must be a mirror of its audience, and Shania's show a reflection of its particular country-pop audience. In other words, if music is a mask designed to be appealing to its target demographic, it must be a mirror of that demographic's emotions and desires—whether or not it is, as cultivation theory suggests, responsible for producing them in the first place.

A male fan in his thirties from Pennsylvania describes Shania as “natural” and “universal.”<sup>245</sup> Is she then naturally a mirror of everyone, everywhere? Quantitatively speaking, her global record sales certainly suggest as much. Tyson Parker of Universal Music Canada suggests the same in qualitative terms, characterizing her as “a citizen of the world” who is part of a “unique global music village.”<sup>246</sup> From a music-analytical point of view, Shania's songs in themselves also suggest exceptionally wide appeal, filled to the brim as they are with compelling appeals to listeners' sense of pathos through uplifting lyrics and upbeat melodies, harmonies, and rhythms.

But what do universality and naturality mean in the context of a Las Vegas spectacle? A closer examination of Shania's Colosseum show will shed light on how

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<sup>244</sup> Étienne de Jouy, *L'Hermite de la Guiane*, quoted in James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>245</sup> E-mail interview with a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

<sup>246</sup> Parker, telephone interview.



these abstract concepts so often associated with global superstars play out onstage in practical terms.

## ii. Country-Pop at the Colosseum

With the start of Shania's residency, many changes came to Caesars Palace. The same smoky air, slot machine jingles, and ancient Roman décor still greet showgoers. But the metal detectors are gone. And though Céline will be back in a few short weeks, Shania is the thematic flavour of the moment. The Céline gift shop is now the Shania gift shop. The *Celine* banner on the eye-catching Caesars billboard on the Strip has disappeared, replaced with a *Shania: Still the One* banner. In the casino, a promotional image for the show—a close-up of Shania nuzzling a horse—is emblazoned on poker tables. Around the Colosseum specifically, Shania's iconic costumes are on display. Entering or exiting the venue, glass display cases by the escalators also seek to draw your attention to Shania merchandise on offer in the gift shop. If you enjoyed the show, perhaps you would also enjoy Shania's tell-all memoir? The Colosseum's seamless thematic makeover since Céline's show went on hiatus underscores the transposable nature of the venue.

Unlike Céline who embarked on her first Colosseum residency show at the height of her career, Shania has been out of the spotlight for nearly a decade. John Nelson of AEG Live predicts that her show will be very successful in part due to the pent-up demand.<sup>247</sup> But Shania's fans have mixed feelings about the show, unlike Céline's fans who are generally more accustomed to and embracing of the idea. As a male fan in his sixties from Maine explains, “a lot of fans are disappointed” that Shania is headlining in

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<sup>247</sup> Nelson, personal interview.

Vegas rather than embarking on a tour.<sup>248</sup> A male fan in his thirties from Pennsylvania similarly feels she ought to release new albums and “give back to her fans that have been with her for a decade or more.”<sup>249</sup>

While Céline can make operatic pretenses with her glamorous image, extensive vocal range, and suitability to orchestral accompaniment, Shania is a less natural fit for a concert hall setting, let alone one of ancient Roman grandeur like the Colosseum. As Simon Frith points out in “Live Music Matters,” venues of some “filth and seediness” are central to the mythos of country music.<sup>250</sup> Indeed, Shania’s fans make pilgrimages to Timmins to visit the bars—or even just the sites of now defunct bars—where she performed as a child. In keeping with the stripped-down conventions of country music performance practice, even Shania’s touring shows as a global superstar were relatively simple productions, buoyed by the musical talents of herself and her band rather than the elaborate sets and laser lighting typical of Colosseum shows. As Jason Gastwirth of Caesars Entertainment explains, Colosseum shows are distinct from other productions by Caesars’ resident stars:

Clearly, with these shows, it’s not just a Céline or Shania concert. These are specific shows. All of our headliners, frankly, have shows that are specific to the market, specific to the venue, and generally have larger production value than what one would see on the road where they’re in for one night and moving into an arena.<sup>251</sup>

There is a clear contrast between the casual tone of Shania’s music and

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<sup>248</sup> E-mail interview with a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

<sup>249</sup> E-mail interview with a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

<sup>250</sup> Simon Frith, “Live Music Matters,” *Scottish Music Review* 1, no. 1 (2007): 9.

<sup>251</sup> Gastwirth, personal interview.

performance style, and the elegance and formality of the Colosseum where ushers typically ask all but those in the frontmost rows to sit down should the music inspire them to rise and dance. Shania's show downplays the refinement of the surroundings, through gestures ranging from the use of real horses onstage to fake snow sprinkled on top of the audience to campfire-scented perfume piped into the ventilation system. The sights and smells of Ontario's wilderness region are thus engineered as part of the show, making a spectacle of Shania's fabled Northern upbringings.

It is not until the very end of the show that Shania gives in, as it were, with a few Céline-style glamour numbers in which she embraces flowing, floor-length evening gowns and classical staging which positions her as a diva at the centre of attention. For the majority of the show, Shania is instead surrounded by dancers and back-up singers (Canadian twin duo RyanDan and her sister Carrie-Ann Brown). Like Céline, she also ventures near to and on some occasions into the audience at points, touching fans' hands like a religious figure bestowing blessings. After such interactions, fans high-five other fans who weren't able get close enough to touch Shania, as though her touch were contagious.

Instead of the myriad musical identities Céline adopts over the course of her show, Shania oscillates between two primary identities, cowgirl and pop diva. Aesthetically, moreover, the show revolves around two key binaries: dark/light and natural/unnatural. The show's, and indeed Shania's, lack of commitment to either identity or aesthetic prevents the formation of potentially alienating polarities. The moment one thinks that the show is going in a certain stylistic direction, it veers in the opposite direction. Is Shania a pop star or a country singer-songwriter? A woman or a machine?

These questions present themselves as the show progresses from a pop set to a country set to another pop set to an acoustic set and finally to a diva-esque ballad sequence leading into a spectacular encore.

### *Preshow*

Before the show begins, a dynamic forest scene is projected onto sheets which substitute for traditional red velvet curtains. The forest scene is complemented by piped-in flute, strings, guitar, and birdsong-based ambient music that recalls spa Muzak and indeed emblemizes the tension between the natural and unnatural that runs through the show. Amid the trees, a girl who looks like a young Shania, a horse, and other forest creatures discreetly roam about. An audience member asks aloud, “Is that Shania?” Another muses about the forest scene’s significance more generally, asking his companion, “Didn’t she use to plant trees?”

The meaning is clear for those familiar with Shania’s biography. The scene refers to her beginnings in Northern Ontario, the site of key events in her public life story from her impoverished upbringing to the start of her music career at local bars to her parents’ early deaths in a car crash to her summers spent planting trees deep in the wilderness to support her family. The significance of this kind of imagery for Shania’s fans is powerful. As a male fan in his sixties from Maine puts it, “my favorite thing about Shania is that despite all that has happened to her, she hasn’t changed. She’s still the girl from Timmins.” The nature scene that functions as a prelude to the show clearly intends to convey as much. The fan even shares his favourite picture of Shania with me: a simple shot of her leaning into a tree. In his words, “It shows Shania with nature and not the superstar she looks like in many of her photos. It’s a down to earth setting, so to

speak.”<sup>252</sup> The forest scene, it seems, is aesthetically right on point for Shania’s target demographic.

Other showgoers are more gossipy in their preshow conversation, wondering aloud about Shania’s personal life. Their conversations specifically turn to the incredible story of how Shania’s husband and collaborator—legendary music producer Mutt Lange—left her for her best friend, only for Shania to fall in love with and marry her best friend’s husband. A woman from South Dakota sitting next to me tells me about how exciting it has been to come to Vegas to see Shania. She is staying at Caesars and celebrating her 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. She says she loves that Shania writes her own songs, and also that she’s a vegetarian. She talks about seeing Shania’s Oprah Winfrey Network docu-series, and volunteers pointed commentary on the affair that ended the star’s marriage: “No one cheats on Shania.”

### *Pop*

The flowing drapes open to reveal a video of Shania riding a black horse in a canyon. After the colour of the sky changes from pink to blue as though the sun has risen, a motorcycle replaces the horse and Shania speeds down a desert highway. As in Céline’s show, the opening film carries over into the realm of the show. Bathed in bright yellow-green light, the real Shania enters the stage aboard a flying motorcycle complete with a roaring engine. This represents a stark aesthetic shift from the earlier forest motif, from the natural to the mechanical.

The motorcycle and catsuit costume that Shania sports during this number refer to the music video for the song she launches into, her 2002 hit “I’m Gonna Getcha Good!”

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<sup>252</sup> E-mail interview of a Shania Twain fan, June 24, 2012.

In fact, the *mise-en-scène* mimics her music videos all throughout the show, recalling her MTV-fueled rise to fame. In this sense, the show feels like typical Vegas nostalgia fare, a recap of a hit-filled career, whereas Céline's shows—particularly *Celine*, but also *A New Day...*—have featured not only her hits but also numerous covers.

The next number, “You Win My Love” (1995), likewise refers to the racetrack theme of the music video with a black-and-white checked pattern projected onto the backdrop screens. Lyrically, the song is a series of vehicle-related metaphors for love, as in the opening lines “I’m lookin’ for a lover / Who can rev his little engine up / He can have a ‘55 Chevy / Or a fancy little pick-up truck.” One might not expect to hear such blue-collar phraseology from a red velvet seat inside a faux Colosseum.

The staging of the next song, “Don’t Be Stupid (You Know I Love You)” (1997), takes the audience back to nature, albeit a more synthetic-looking one than the preshow forest scene. Dynamic images of water splashing around are projected onto the backdrop screens in reference to the splashing water of the music video. At times, the water “splashes” over to the walls on the sides of the stage, in a 3-D effect that makes it seem like it is being cast out upon the audience.

Unlike Céline, Shania does not talk to the audience until near the end of her first set, just before she launches into her 2002 hit “Up!” She is excited that “it’s Friday night in Vegas” and encourages the audience to forget all their troubles and “party” with her. She alludes to her tabloidized troubles in this brief monologue, mentioning the challenges she faced in returning to the stage and quoting the lyrics of the song to enthuse that “there’s no way but up from here.” The audience should take it from her, she insists.

During this pop set, a certain smell is perceptible in the air. Few would recognize

it instinctively, but it is Shania's Still the One perfume (created especially for the show and of course available for purchase in the gift shop), which is piped into the ventilation system at the start of every show. As director and producer Raj Kapoor explains, "You know when a woman comes into the room and you can practically smell her? We created a scent for that moment." In so doing, they copied the practice of perfuming the air common to Vegas hotel-casinos. This perfume is in fact just the first in a trio of scents piped into the Colosseum over the course of the show.<sup>253</sup>

Using perfumes as part of the concert has the effect of enveloping the audience in the experience. As J. Douglas Porteous observes, psychological research shows that smells are likely to elicit emotional responses. Visual effects are typically more central to spectacular shows, but vision, he notes, "distances us from the object. We frame 'views' in pictures and camera lenses; the likelihood of an intellectual response is considerable." Smells go the extra mile by enveloping the audience in a way that is likely to elicit emotional responses: "They penetrate the body and permeate the immediate environment, and thus one's response is much more likely to involve strong affect."<sup>254</sup>

As a corollary of its immersive nature, smell is political. As Laura U. Marks argues, proximal senses like smell are generally quite "resistant to mass communication" by virtue of "their intimacy, relation to memory . . . , and affective intensity." But by her logic, the engineered synaesthetic effects of a show like Shania's "invade and encode the

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<sup>253</sup> Rae Votta, "Shania Brings Horses, Subliminal Scents to Las Vegas," December 16, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/photos/live/1481368/shania-twain-brings-horses-subliminal-scents-to-las-vegas-show-report> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>254</sup> J. Douglas Porteous, "Smellscape," in *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 91.

private space of the proximal senses,” thus “threatening this resistance.”<sup>255</sup> Indeed, the proximal senses exist “on the membrane between shared and private, codified and uncodable experience ... at the literal border between the intimate and the communal.” When their resistance is worn down, a “communication that makes use of them may lose in ‘objectivity’ but it gains in depth, trust, and sociality.”<sup>256</sup> Thus the power of the perfumes permeating the air throughout Shania’s show.

### *Country*

The country set begins with another short film, this time showing two Shanias—one with a white dress, wavy hair, and straw cowboy hat, and another with a black cape, straight hair, and matching hat—in a computer-generated desert environment. The two Shanias enter a saloon, and a black Shania versus white Shania bar brawl begins. The shows I attended in early December 2012 coincided with the National Finals Rodeos, the so-called “Superbowl of Rodeos,” so the audience was always well-populated with cowboys outfitted in the traditional hats, jeans, and boots. This country set seems expressly tailored for such an audience, showcasing Shania’s cowgirl persona.

A faux rural town appears onstage complete with a saloon, bank, livery stable, hotel, and church. The cartoonish artificiality of the set is surprising, seeing as technology exists to make sets look far more realistic and encouraging of the suspension of disbelief. First of all, the fact that the saloon, bank, and other town establishments are all labeled as such rather than given ‘authentic’ names gives away their fakery. Moreover, as one reviewer describes, the “ ‘down-home’ Western sets ... could have come from a 1970s

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<sup>255</sup> Laura U. Marks, “Thinking Multisensory Culture,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 2 (July 2008): 132.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.



CBC variety special.”<sup>257</sup> But perhaps the alienating artificiality of the set is the underlying message of this part of the show. According to Peterson, country music is all an act—Shania is just underscoring as much more openly than country singers typically do.

Shania enters the stage wearing a country frock and riding a black horse outfitted with a pink and black saddle, the first of two real horses to appear over the course of the show. After she disembarks, the horse remains at the side of the stage with a dancer who continuously swirls his lasso. Dancing around the saloon with an array of backing dancers and musicians, Shania launches into “I Ain’t No Quitter” (2004), a song which, when experienced through the lens of Chuck Taylor’s description, matches the self-consciously superficial country aesthetics of the set perfectly. In Taylor’s words, the track “tries so hard to be country, you suspect that Twain means it.” The lyrics, he points out, conjure up classic country to such an extent that they seem parodic. For instance, Shania describes her beloved as follows: “He drinks, he smokes, he’ll cuss, he tells bad jokes / He’s a boozier, a loser.” In its brazen lack of subtlety, the song thus “wink[s] in the face of a classic country theme” and leaves Taylor wondering whether Shania remains “honestly invested in her country roots.”<sup>258</sup>

The set poses just the same question, as does the “leathery and vintage”<sup>259</sup> saloon scent seeping into the air, though not nearly as obviously due to its invisible nature.

Marks argues that affective stimuli “allow people to respond *as they will*—not necessarily

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<sup>257</sup> Richard Ouzounian, “Shania Twain in Vegas: The Woman’s Great, the Show Needs Work,” *Toronto Star*, December 2, 2012.

<sup>258</sup> Chuck Taylor, review of “I Ain’t No Quitter,” *Billboard*, May 21, 2005, 46.

<sup>259</sup> Rae Votta, “Shania Brings Horses, Subliminal Scents to Las Vegas,” December 16, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/photos/live/1481368/shania-twain-brings-horses-subliminal-scents-to-las-vegas-show-report> (accessed March 12, 2013).

all in the same way.”<sup>260</sup> So it follows that the perfumed air of Shania’s show is not necessarily dictatorial. The smell of a saloon might for some bring with it nostalgia for their hometown bar, or as in my case as a city-dweller seem entirely foreign and even exotic.

After “I Ain’t No Quitter,” Shania moves through a trio of country chart hits from earlier in her career: “No One Needs to Know” (1995), “Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?” (1995), and “Any Man of Mine” (1995). Before “No One Needs to Know,” she strips off her country frock to reveal jeans and a pink plaid shirt. She then ascends the saloon’s front stairs so she can hang the frock on a hook by the front door, as though her production were such a low-key one that there were no stagehands to assist with the costume change.

Shania essentially breaks the fourth wall before “Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?” at one concert date. She comments briefly on how she grew up listening to country music and how the likes of Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson have inspired her songwriting. She also makes a special acknowledgement of all the country music fans in the audience. But she prefaces “Boots” by calling it one of her favourite “country music set-ups” of the show, a Freudian slip-like acknowledgement of the fact that country music—and especially her brand of it—is indeed a set-up. Peterson would approve. This word, “set-up,” evokes images of behind-the-scenes producers and directors mapping out the show as a series of artificial aesthetic constructions.

As Shania launches into the “set-up” for “Boots,” the saloon’s façade opens up to reveal an equally façade-like bar inside. She emphatically struts around in her pink boots

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<sup>260</sup> Marks, 134.

to underscore the central imagery of the song. And as the next song, “Any Man of Mine,” draws to an end, the country town self-consciously rolls offstage with the performers onboard, casting away any and all realistic pretenses.

### *Pop*

Shania is as unsubtle as a pop artist as she is as a country artist. A short film prefacing this second pop set shows her wearing leopard-print outfits, sitting on a leopard-print couch, and attracting the attention of an actual leopard which licks its lips at the sight of Shania. Then, two leopard statues are projected onto the walls to the left and right of the stage. Shania enters the desert scenery that appears onstage wearing a leopard-print outfit. She launches into “That Don’t Impress Me Much” (1997), whose music video features her iconic leopard-print costume. The projected leopard statues come to life as she sings, shaking their heads and dancing at turns, while leopard-print lighting flashes around the stage. As in the music video, there are also industrial-looking, smoke-emitting pipes rising out of the ground in this desert fantasyland, suggesting both an imminent explosion from the energy of the music and the complex machinations underlying the production. Las Vegas, a hotspot for nuclear testing in the mid-twentieth century, is essentially a similar landscape.

Equally zany animal imagery plays a role in Shania’s next number, “Honey, I’m Home” (1997). Big-eyed animated orange fish “swim” on top of the desert floor displayed on the backdrop. The desert floor is now not sand but, in keeping with the feline theme, leopard skin. The leopard theme comes full circle at the end of Shania’s performance of “(If You’re Not In It For Love) I’m Outta Here!” (1995), when a number of pink doors appear complete with brass leopard door knockers. One seemingly lifelike

door descends onto the stage on a screen and, magically, Shania walks through it at the end of the song, only to find another leopard waiting for her on the other side.

*Acoustic*

The scent of a wood fire mingling with roasting marshmallows signals the beginning of Shania's campfire sing-along. A film montage showcasing highlights of Shania's music videos prefaces the acoustic set, and some audience members sigh aloud, caught in nostalgia. A faux campfire appears onstage surrounded by faux rocks to sit on, with a starlit forest scene appearing in the background. Shania then appears in simple shorts and a T-shirt. She first introduces her male backup singers, identical twin duo RyanDan. The trio sings a few bars of The Hollies' 1967 hit "Carrie Anne" a cappella, by way of introducing Shania's sister who was named after the song.

Like Céline, Shania shares very personal thoughts with the audience. She talks of how her mother, who loved "Carrie Anne," died a long time ago, leaving her sister behind as a "gift." She expresses how she would not have signed on for the Vegas show had it not been for her sister's encouragement and willingness to sing backup vocals despite having, as Shania puts it, a "normal" life back in Ontario that she was not eager to leave. Shania also explains how her sister, despite her musical talent, never dreamt of being a professional singer, perhaps as a result of seeing how their parents would wake up Shania at midnight to do sets at bars—not exactly an ideal childhood activity. Shania also comments on the campfire set, which is personally significant to her. Campfires are a favourite Canadian pastime, she says, perpetuating the stereotype of Canada as a backwoods nation.

Shania then proceeds to invite fans onstage to sing around the campfire and take photos with her. They sing “Come on Over” (1997), “Rock This Country!” (1997), and “Today is Your Day” (2011) as an ensemble. She subtly references her tabloid drama when introducing the last song, explaining that she wrote the uplifting tune when she “was feeling sad a bit ago.” True to the show’s aesthetic tendency toward multi-layered thematic reinforcement, the stripped-down manner in which these songs are presented mirrors the stripped-down way in which she interacts with the audience during this part of the show.

For Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi, Shania’s confessional monologues amount to “emotional labour.” As they explain, in the fallout of a scandal, celebrities must develop a public story to convincingly explain it away. Such “life scripts” function as “means of attempted self-validation.”<sup>261</sup> Shania certainly performs the kind of emotional labour Nunn and Biressi describe during the acoustic set, subtly going on the record about the trials and tribulations of her life from childhood to her recent divorce. The show becomes unscripted so Shania can go on script, as it were, and rouse the audience’s sense of pathos. Practically speaking, personal “revelations [are] integral to the highly profitable circulation of the celebrity figure in contemporary media markets.”<sup>262</sup> They are thus central to this show as a commodity.

The relative organicity of this part of the show allows for some endearing, spontaneous interactions between Shania and the onstage fans, such as Shania singing “Happy Birthday” to a man turning 70. It also allows for some unfortunate, unexpected

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<sup>261</sup> Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi, “‘A Trust Betrayed’: Celebrity and the Work of Emotion,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 49-50.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

moments, such as two boisterous sisters who crash the campfire with deliberately terrible singing and an incestuous kiss, only to awkwardly find that no one in the apparently conservative cowboy-filled audience is cheering them on. Yet the awkwardness never has anything to do with Shania herself or with her recent tabloid dramas, as it does with less likeable musicians.

For instance, at the Las Vegas Hotel—some distance away from the glamorous part of the Strip where Caesars is situated—a show that is the perfect affective contrast piece to Shania’s was running during my December 2012 visit. While Shania is an Oprah-certified victim, the star of *An Evening with LeAnn Rimes* is decidedly not, having been publically convicted of cheating on her husband. Before the show begins, cowboy-hatted showgoers muse aloud about the much-publicized affair that has left the American country star in a position antithetical to Shania’s. No one in my vicinity defends her; at best, some seem concerned for her well-being. Instead of the elaborate, two-year-long production that Shania has to her name, LeAnn merely has a three-night run and a stage featuring only a band and some seasonal decorations. And instead of the adoring cheers that Shania ritually receives throughout her show, there are some awkward moments between LeAnn and her audience, particularly when she sings a ballad called “Borrowed” about the definitively not Oprah-certified joys she found in “borrowing” her now-husband from his ex-wife. One could sense the audience’s lack of certainty as to whether to embrace this piece of LeAnn’s life script or not. The crowd fell silent as she sang, and just one fan belatedly yelled out an approbatory comment (“Happy anniversary!”) afterwards, as if to break the awkward silence. Where Shania plays an emotionally

appealing victim in her life script, LeAnn is an emotionally unappealing guilty party in hers.

Shania's interactions with her "backyard" visitors—to use Tyson Parker's characterization of her show—are limited and to some extent calculated given the similarities apparent from one show to the next, even during the relatively organic campfire sequence. By contrast, LeAnn's interactions with her "living room" guests—her description of the audience at the start of the show—appear to be mostly spontaneous given the extent to which they respond to audience feedback. In the public eye, LeAnn is flawed and human, which is only underscored by her very loose, candid engagement with showgoers. She has cracks, while Shania lies on the opposite end of the spectrum as a figure apparently without cracks, both as a human and as a showgirl. A major part of Shania's appeal, particularly in the intimate acoustic campfire segment of the show, is evidently her moral persona, which she conveys to the audience in a choreographed manner as they cheer her on. When the two sisters kiss, Shania does nothing as if to pretend it never happened, where LeAnn seemingly would not have hesitated to make some kind of humorous comment. Shania stays on message.

### *Ballads*

Shania makes her most dramatic identity shift of the show when she transforms from a campfire singer to a power ballad diva for the concert's final segment. The introductory video shows a black horse—an anthropomorphic symbol for Shania—encircled by a forest fire. Survival seems unlikely, until suddenly the flames turn to snow and the black horse turns white in an uplifting cinematic conclusion to Shania's life script as relayed during the campfire segment. As in Céline's show, dark begets light. The

message is clear: Shania Twain® has been reborn.

Against a snowy forest backdrop, Shania enters the stage riding a white horse and wearing a white gown to sing “You’re Still the One” (1997). Fake snow falls on the audience as she sings her classic love song to the immaculately groomed and trained horse, staring into its eyes and caressing it. She then proceeds to sing “From This Moment On” (1997) as white sheets flow around her, buoyed by a wind machine to create the rippling effect of a river. As the song comes to an end, she dramatically descends below the stage on a moving platform, pulling the sheets with her.

#### *Encore*

Shania closes the show with a flashy rendition of her upbeat classic “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” (1997), wearing thigh-high leather boots, a sparkly mini dress, and black sleeves recalling her iconic music video look. A “SHANIA” sign composed of hundreds of sparkling lights rises up above the stage and the audience becomes more active and excited than at any previous point in the show. Shania dons a velour sweatshirt with an “S” on the back to take her final bow, as though a famous athlete or an egocentric rapper—a far cry from her earlier campfire sing-along persona. How did we go from the forest to a racetrack to a saloon to a leopard-filled desert to a campfire to a classic, full-out Vegas spectacle in the space of ninety minutes?

Guy Debord has an answer. In his view,

The fetishism of the commodity—the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things”—attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it,



yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.<sup>263</sup>

Perhaps, then, Shania's show is best understood as a steady build-up to this spectacular climax, despite its country music pretenses which suggest an opposition to spectacle. The country-pop commodity that is Shania comes full circle.

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<sup>263</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002), par. 36.

## VII. Why Compare Céline and Shania?

### *Manmade Divas*

The most essential bond that Shania and Céline share is that they are both women. Why is this noteworthy? As Greg Potter explains, “rock stars, according to popular myth, are traditionally men while women are viewed as groupies regardless of their talent.” The result is that the stakes are high for female musicians hoping to achieve credibility.<sup>264</sup> In the case of Céline and Shania, the process of achieving credibility clearly involved the assistance of powerful men.

Both Céline and Shania began their careers as child performers in bars and were eventually discovered by the men who would make their careers. Céline’s “fairy tale-like” rise to fame began when she was “‘discovered’ at age 12 by a 39 year old manager/former pop singer whom she later married.” René Angélil, who had previously co-managed Québec teen pop sensation René Simard with Guy Cloutier, turned Céline into an international star by the time she was 30.<sup>265</sup>

The fairy tale element is clear both in Dion’s rapid rise to fame and in the assistance provided by her prince charming figure, Angélil, whom she would later marry and—at least according to the narrative she actively markets in interviews—live happily every after with. There is also a makeover element to the story, insofar as Angélil had Céline put her career on hiatus for a year when she was seventeen both to learn English and undergo a physical transformation. As Erin Hurley explains, she “re-emerged with a more grown-up look, straightened and capped teeth, and a sexier wardrobe.”<sup>266</sup> In other

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<sup>264</sup> Potter, 72.

<sup>265</sup> Grenier, 31.

<sup>266</sup> Hurley, 145.

words, she came back primed for a crossover from her Francophone child star career to an Anglophone adult career.

Angélil started out in the sixties as a member of the Québécois pop-rock band Les Baronets. The band rode the trend for making French versions of English hits, as with one of their most popular songs, “C’est Fou, Mais C’est Tout” (1964), which translated the Beatles’ “Hold Me Tight” for French-speaking Québec. With Céline, Angélil would do just the opposite, making a French-Canadian singer palatable across provincial, national, and continental borders. Yet he did deploy one cover band tactic in cultivating Céline’s career, having her mimic the musical and performance styles of other superstars from Frank Sinatra to Mariah Carey.

Similarly, Shania was a largely unknown country singer when she met Mutt Lange, a renowned British music producer behind hits by the likes of Bryan Adams and AC/DC. Shania’s début album on a Nashville label was unsuccessful, but her next album, *The Woman in Me* (1995)—her first collaboration with Lange—was a smash hit. In the United States alone, the album has gone twelve times platinum.

Ab Bryant, a member of Canadian rock bands Chilliwack and Headpins, insists that Lange “completely made” Shania.<sup>267</sup> Bryant’s perspective is not only representative of the critical mainstream but also of diva scholarship. A diva, according to Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope in *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*, is “a product produced by men as a vessel for men’s voices.”<sup>268</sup> This definition seemingly fits both Shania and Céline, two stars who have achieved significant degrees of

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<sup>267</sup> Ab Bryant, quoted in Potter, 186.

<sup>268</sup> Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 12-13.

professional recognition against the statistical odds for a female musician.

Indeed, as sociologists Vaughn Schmutz and Alison Faupel reveal in “Gender and Cultural Consecration in Popular Music,” gender greatly impacts the likelihood that a musician will achieve cultural legitimization and consecration. In the first place, the authors point out that female pop musicians do not receive as much media coverage as male pop musicians.<sup>269</sup> Moreover, from their quantitative study of legitimizing agents including *Rolling Stone’s* 2003 Greatest Albums Ever List, *Billboard* charts, Grammy Awards results, and music reviews, the authors conclude that female musicians are less likely than their male counterparts to attain “cultural legitimacy of any type—popular, professional or critical.”<sup>270</sup>

The figures that Schmutz and Faupel uncover certainly suggest as much. For instance, they identify that just thirty-eight out of the five hundred albums on the *Rolling Stone* Greatest Albums Ever List are by female musicians, comprising only 7.6% of the total albums.<sup>271</sup> The authors also compared how often male and female musicians are described in reviews using intellectualizing terms which place them in the arena of high art. They found that male musicians are often described in terms suggesting originality, complexity, seriousness, and timelessness. Examples they point to include descriptions of Bob Dylan as “pioneering,” Bob Marley as “genius,” Sam Cooke as “inventive,” the Beastie Boys as “revolutionary,” Brian Eno as “eccentric,” Jackson Browne as “weighty,” the Beatles as “sophisticated,” Van Morrison as “enigmatic,” Jimi Hendrix as “cryptic,” and Radiohead as “esoteric.” One would never imagine reading such

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<sup>269</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 688.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 697.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 695.

characterizations in a review of either Céline's or Shania's music, and indeed the authors found that they are rarely used in connection with any female pop stars. The authors therefore conclude that female pop musicians' output is less likely than male pop musicians' to be considered culturally and historically significant.<sup>272</sup>

On the flipside, Schmutz and Faupel found that female pop musicians are more likely than their male counterparts to be framed in tabloid terms in reviews. Rather than being culturally consecrated through high art discourse, female musicians are frequently considered in light of their personal lives and professional connections. Quantitatively speaking, "Among reviews of female artists, 65.8 percent contain at least one type of reference to social or professional networks, compared to only 44.3 percent of male reviews." What is more, "Female artists are tied to other artists and professionals in 34.2 percent of cases (versus 26.8% of cases), often linked to more established male artists." Finally, their "networks with non-artists are mentioned in 28.9 percent of cases, while only 13.7 percent of reviews of male artists contain such mentions." The authors specify that networks with non-artists typically involve commentary on musicians' "personal relationships with spouses, partners, or families,"<sup>273</sup> as is common in tabloid articles.

Céline's and Shania's husband-collaborators of course entail that their social, professional, and personal networks overlap. Thus, all three kinds of networks inevitably come to play in reviews of their music. One is indeed hard pressed to find commentary on Céline and Shania which makes no mention of the former's powerhouse manager/husband and the latter's powerhouse producer/husband. This reflects both the gendered biases of music criticism that Schmutz and Faupel identify and the reality that

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<sup>272</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 699.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 701.

men are a dominant force in the music industry, traditionally holding the majority of production and decision-making positions.<sup>274</sup>

For instance, the blunt headline of an article on Angélil anoints him “The Man Who Made Celine.”<sup>275</sup> Similarly, in a *New York Times* review of Shania’s Caesars Palace show, Jon Caramanica is quick to point out that “In 2008 her marriage to Mutt Lange, who produced her best albums, collapsed when he left her for one of her close friends.”<sup>276</sup> Such examples illustrate Schmutz and Faupel’s observation that reviewers frequently attribute the success of female musicians “to the paternal guidance of others in the field,”<sup>277</sup> of which Céline’s and Shania’s much-older husband-collaborators are certainly emblematic. Critics would have us believe that Céline and Shania are legitimate musicians only in connection with their husband-collaborators.

In my interviews with music executives, the same held true. Céline is spoken of as one half of Céline and René—the body and the brains, respectively, behind Celine Dion Inc. Likewise, Shania’s now ex-husband came up in interviews as a matter of course. Both Céline and Shania are winners of Grammy Awards, recipients of stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and have garnered numerous *Billboard* chart hits—all indicators of cultural consecration. But the narratives through which their success is understood are inextricably tied to the men behind them. As Céline’s and Shania’s perceived lack of autonomy suggests, there are two kinds of legitimating discourses: one for men, presumed to be agentic and independent, and another for women, presumed to

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<sup>274</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 687.

<sup>275</sup> Ramin Setoodeh, “The Man Who Made Celine,” *The Daily Beast*, May 15, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/03/15/angelil-the-man-behind-celine-dions-las-vegas-return.html> (accessed March 12, 2013).

<sup>276</sup> Jon Caramanica, “Rebound, as Demure as Ever,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2012.

<sup>277</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 701.

be passive and male-dependent.<sup>278</sup>

Consecration is often considered “a discrete category”—a musician is either praised as an artist or not, recognized by the Grammys and *Billboard* or not. But evidently, consecration comes in many different shades, in “gendered variations.” The ramifications of this are significant, apparent not just in the contemporaneous careers of pop stars but also in their reputational careers, which ultimately determine their places in the popular music canon and music history generally.<sup>279</sup>

However, the undeniable fact that Céline’s and Shania’s career successes are closely intertwined with Angélil and Lange, respectively, complicates interpretations of media coverage of them as unilaterally sexist. Perhaps gender issues are de facto irrelevant here. Maybe Céline’s and Shania’s relationships with the men who have aided their careers should be understood as bonds between equals wherein it just so happens that the female coworker is better at singing, and the male coworker at attending to behind-the-scenes concerns. Indeed, just like the critics who cover their music, both stars never shy away from crediting their husband-collaborators in public.

Nonetheless, the notion of a behind-the-scenes male controlling a front-and-center female performer leaves one feeling queasy from a theoretical perspective. It leaves one recalling the likes of Olympia from *Les contes d’Hoffmann*, a manmade life-sized mechanical doll whose perfect beauty and singing make her a star freakshow attraction. It leaves one wondering how much control Angélil and Lange have really exerted over their creations, and whether there would even be a Céline and Shania as we know them today if it were not for them.

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<sup>278</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 704.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

### *Sentimental*

In line with stereotypes about femininity, Carl Wilson perceives Céline as “all candlelight and sentiment.” She waxes poetic about love in her songs and gushes about her perfect family life to the press. To Wilson, she seems “unapologetically emotionally direct” to the point of being embarrassing.<sup>280</sup> Shania has the potential to elicit embarrassment as well, being similarly open about her emotions from her saccharine love songs to her tell-all docu-series in the wake of her divorce from Lange.

Certainly, the arts are vehicles for self-expression. But popular art is rarely viewed as organic expression. In Adornian ideology, it is seen as manufactured, like any other assembly-line factory product. Are the emotions expressed in pop stars’ songs likewise manufactured? Céline’s and Shania’s output is certainly widely distributed beyond its source in the way that only a product can be. The stars could not physically preach to their entire congregations.

According to Schmutz and Faupel, female musicians are typically perceived as being more honest and authentic than their male counterparts. In other words, female musicians function as emotional labourers. Referring to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Schmutz and Faupel note that “women are clustered in jobs that require emotional labor because it is generally assumed that women feel and manage their emotions better than men.”<sup>281</sup> Similarly, they posit, “the expressiveness associated with authentic musical performance is a type of emotional labor that women may be perceived as better able to produce.”<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Wilson, “All That Is Solid Melts into Schmaltz,” 307.

<sup>281</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), cited in Schmutz and Faupel, 692.

<sup>282</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 692.



One would hardly imagine a male rock star breaking down during an Oprah interview; doing so would call his hardcore persona into question. But for a female musician like Céline and Shania, doing so effects an aura of ‘authenticity.’ Indeed, through their study of music reviews, Schmutz and Faupel conclude that critics consider music by female musicians to be more emotionally authentic than that by male musicians.<sup>283</sup>

### *Bland*

When I ask popular music scholar Rob Bowman why he thinks Céline and Shania are rarely objects of scholarly inquiry, he answers that he simply believes they aren’t provocative enough.<sup>284</sup> They and their music, in other words, are too bland. They’re both like blank slates, in a way, so middle-of-the-road that one has to inject theories and critical arguments into them because they are not actively projecting such notions outwards as some other pop artists do. Indeed, they do not make a critic’s work easy, announcing or even suggesting which social, cultural, political, or aesthetic boundaries they are pushing and when. To study them, one must probe beneath the surface of seemingly hollow entities.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu “use[s] the term ‘consecration’ to describe the distinction between ‘sacred’ artistic offerings and their ‘profane’ counterparts. Acts of cultural consecration venerate a select few cultural creators or works that are worthy of particular admiration in contrast to the multitude that are not.”<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, as Schmutz and Faupel explain, consecration legitimizes art itself: “By focusing on a few exemplars that

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<sup>283</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 699.

<sup>284</sup> Rob Bowman, telephone interview, July 25, 2012.

<sup>285</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1984), cited in Schmutz and Faupel, 685.

represent the aesthetic currently deemed appropriate, art worlds construct histories that lend legitimacy to the field by showing they have always produced work of artistic merit.” But because these constructed histories also make and break artists’ reputations, consecration is a matter of no small consequence.<sup>286</sup> One consequence is that Céline and Shania are rarely taught in the classroom or taken up as scholarly research topics.

Céline, evidently, forms a certain scholarly niche within Canadian and especially Québécois cultural studies. Her role as a national and provincial icon with massive international influence renders her a legitimate topic for consideration in such academic contexts. But in my years as a music student I have not once heard her name mentioned in the classroom. Shania in particular is almost summarily excluded from academic discourse. As Robin Elliott underscores, “She has not yet been the main subject of a single doctoral dissertation or an article in a refereed journal. The neglect is not due to a lack of cogent issues; indeed, the neglect itself could be a promising subject for investigation.”<sup>287</sup>

Perhaps the reason for such neglect is rooted in apprehensions surrounding Shania’s and Céline’s commercial slickness. Drawing on Kembrew McLeod’s “Between Rock and a Hard Place,” Schmutz and Faupel explain that “being seen as too ‘slick’ or overproduced, too commercial or even too popular could potentially disqualify popular musicians from being viewed as genuine auteurs and autonomous artists.”<sup>288</sup> Céline and Shania, with their Oprah-certified ‘authenticity,’ are undoubtedly emblematic of this phenomenon. Students in Bowman’s classes at York University submit papers on self-

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<sup>286</sup> Schmutz and Faupel, 686.

<sup>287</sup> Elliott, 412.

<sup>288</sup> Kembrew McLeod (2002), cited in Schmutz and Faupel, 690.

conscious provocateurs like Lady Gaga rather than the likes of Céline and Shania.<sup>289</sup>

Where pop auteurs in the vein of Madonna actively demand critical attention, Céline and Shania seem content to be below it.

### *Multicultural*

Or are they? For all their perceived blandness, Céline and Shania are notably multicultural in terms of both their music and personae. Madonna has masqueraded as a geisha and danced in a kilt backed by a traditional pipe band, generating a new area of academic inquiry—Madonna Studies—in the process. As Linda Lister notes, Madonna’s ethnic transformations and transmutations have brought her critical acclaim: her Golden Globe-winning role in *Evita* (1996) brought her “newfound respect” and her album *Ray of Light* (1998) “was highly lauded by critics for its unique mixture of techno music and Eastern spirituality.” Thus, in the face of “debates about her method or musical talent, Madonna has proved the merit of her métier by cultivating the mystique of the female pop icon.”<sup>290</sup> Céline and Shania engage in similar gestures of cultural parody and pastiche, but the difference between them and Madonna is that they receive little artistic credit for it.

Both Céline’s and Shania’s output is indeed strikingly culturally adventurous for pop stars frequently written off as bland and whose music is often high on the adult contemporary charts. Céline, for instance, sang folk songs in Mandarin alongside Chinese singer Song Zuying in Beijing for the 2013 Lunar New Year. Shania’s 2002 album *Up!* is inherently multicultural, having been released in country, pop, and Bollywood

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<sup>289</sup> Bowman, telephone interview.

<sup>290</sup> Linda Lister, “Divafication: The Deification of Modern Female Pop Stars,” *Popular Music and Society* 25, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2001): 4.

versions. Somehow, though, multicultural gestures like these come across more as commercial ploys than artistic statements—in Céline’s case a ploy to lure much sought-after “Asian high-roller” clients to Caesars Palace, and in Shania’s case a ploy to broaden her appeal beyond the relatively small country music market share. Madonna equally appropriates ‘other’ cultural practices to suit her needs. But reinvention is her trademark, making her acts of cultural colonization seem almost natural.

Many have frankly branded Céline a sell-out in her exploration of ‘other’ musical cultures. As Neil Strauss opines in a *New York Times* review of her album *A New Day Has Come* (2002),

One minute she’s aping Cher, aspiring for a club classic complete with robotic-sounding vocals (but sung sans effects); the next she’s a one-woman Destiny’s Child, multitracking her voice into silky harmonies over a pop-and-stutter beat; and then she’s a folk-rocker, coming on like some strange mix of Ani DiFranco, Incubus and a high-pitched Everlast. And forget French, her native language. Latin music is what’s selling, so one of her previously recorded French-language love songs is sung in Spanish and slipped into the mix.<sup>291</sup>

Strauss thus casts Céline as one who follows international trends to profitable ends. And scholarship in fact backs this inclination up. Drawing on Masahiro Yasuda’s paper “Localising Dion,” Carl Wilson explains that “Team Céline has gone far beyond ... standard means of overseas seduction: they have coordinated with Sony A&R people around the world to tailor singles, bonus tracks and collaborations to each major market.” The results of this extensive global networking include Céline’s collaborations with

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<sup>291</sup> Neil Strauss, “Celine Dion Nails it Down,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2002.

French singer-songwriter Jean-Jacques Goldman on her album *D'eux* (1995), which became the best-selling French-language album of all time. To attract Japanese fans, Céline even went so far as to record a theme song for a local Fuji TV soap opera: “To Love You More” (1995), a collaboration with Japanese violinist Taro Hakase, became the first single by a foreign artist to reach number one in Japan in over a decade.<sup>292</sup>

John Rockwell similarly questions Shania’s multicultural ventures in a *New York Times* review of *Up!* aptly entitled “She Sings, You Select the Style.” He explains the red (pop), green (country), and blue (international) versions of the CD as follows:

A red CD is sort of power pop, a green CD is sort of country and a blue CD is sort of Bollywood. Depending on where one lives in the world, the buyer gets two versions: in this country, the red and green CD’s; in the rest of the world, the red and blue. But the third version is alluded to by a photo of Ms. Twain dressed up in the style of the missing music in question (so we in the United States get her in full bindi and multiple bracelets and a sort-of sari), and visitors to her Web site can download a couple of cuts from the version they haven’t been able to buy.

Shania and her husband-collaborator allegedly wanted to make *Up!* the best-selling female album of all time. The result is that “the multiple-arrangement strategy has been presumed by some to be a ploy for more international sales and radio play.”<sup>293</sup>

The red CD, Rockwell eventually concludes, falls fundamentally under the genre of Europop, the genre which he feels Shania most naturally fits into. By contrast, he finds the green country disc the “least convincing, throwing the odd, fleet banjo or fiddle track

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<sup>292</sup> Masahiro Yasuda (1999), cited in Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love*, 45.

<sup>293</sup> John Rockwell, “She Sings, You Select The Style,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2002.

into songs that are so tightly structured that there is no real room for country instrumental expansion.” Somewhere in the middle, for him, is the blue Bollywood version, insofar as it “is at least a complete rethinking” of the songs. He bases this opinion on the fact that it was “produced by separate Indian specialists, Simon and Diamond Duggal, and recorded in Bombay with an entire Indian orchestra; you can hear the tablas and shenais and unison violins burbling away in the background pretty much throughout.” The ethnic musical trappings of the blue CD make Shania’s Bollywood act seem somehow more authentic to Rockwell than her country vernacular. All in all, though, it is clear that he is more critically comfortable with Shania in a mainstream pop role than he is with her ‘other’ musical/cultural ventures.<sup>294</sup>

The cynical critical attitude towards Shania’s multicultural endeavours with *Up!* is perhaps best encapsulated by Chris Nelson’s description of the album in culinary terms. “How do you like your Shania Twain?” he asks, as though she were a steak. The three discs of *Up!*, he writes, are indeed like menu options: “Mercury Nashville is serving up her new CD as a sugary treat, with grits on the side, or dipped in curry sauce.”<sup>295</sup> Only sociologists Barry Sandywell and David Beer suggest that *Up!* shows Shania and Lange as auteurs “self-consciously contest[ing] ‘popular’ and ‘serious’ appropriations of their work through explicit experimental play with audience expectations.”<sup>296</sup>

#### *Canadian*

Apart from their global cultural explorations, both Céline and Shania are

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<sup>294</sup> John Rockwell, “She Sings, You Select The Style,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2002.

<sup>295</sup> Chris Nelson, “A Marketing Surprise in Shania Twain’s New CD,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2002.

<sup>296</sup> Barry Sandywell and David Beer, “Stylistic Morphing: Notes in the Digitisation of Contemporary Music Culture,” *Convergence* 11, no. 4 (2005): 114.

fundamentally Canadian. As Ryan Edwardson observes in *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music*, Canadian musicians from “Paul Anka and the Guess Who to Bryan Adams and Feist [are] celebrated as not only musicians but as Canadians.”<sup>297</sup> The same is certainly true of Céline Dion and Shania Twain, both national icons in their own right.

The results of CBC’s 2004 Greatest Canadian Contest provide proof of their positions as Canadian icons. Shania and Céline came in 18<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, respectively, making Shania the highest-ranking woman on the list and Céline the third highest-ranking woman.<sup>298</sup> The contest played out on *The Greatest Canadian* television program; the public was invited to nominate notable Canadians, and viewers then voted online and by phone.<sup>299</sup> The fact that Shania beat out feminist activist and politician Nellie McClung (ranked 25<sup>th</sup>) and that Céline beat out War of 1812 heroine Laura Secord (ranked 35<sup>th</sup>) speaks volumes about the extent to which entertainers are part of national pride and identity despite not playing an active role in the Canadian sociopolitical arena.<sup>300</sup>

As Kaela Jubas points out, both Shania and Céline fit certain female stereotypes, making their high rankings in the Greatest Canadian Contest intriguing in gender terms. Shania, for her part, embodies “an acceptable image of female beauty: she is fun and flirtatious, without the overt sexuality of another music industry celebrity, Madonna.” Céline, for her part, personifies both gender studies scholar June Purvis’ “ ‘perfect wife and mother’ of the bourgeois class and her ‘good woman’ of the working class,” being “a

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<sup>297</sup> Edwardson, 13.

<sup>298</sup> Kaela Jubas, “Theorizing Gender in Contemporary Canadian Citizenship: Lessons from the CBC’s Greatest Canadian Contest,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 2 (2006): 576.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 565.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

loyal wife, a loving mother, a romantic spirit, as well as an industrious, steady worker.” In addition to conforming to common female ideals, both Shania and Céline have ascended to superstardom from humble small-town beginnings. In this way, they “offer proof that the promises of Canada’s liberal democracy can be realized.”<sup>301</sup>

The degree to which Shania’s and Céline’s relatable feminine, working-class personae speak to Canadians is further evinced by the results of a survey conducted by travel website Travelocity.ca. The survey sought to determine which celebrities Canadians would most like to take a vacation with. Shania came out as the most desirable celebrity travel companion. She was the top choice among all male travellers surveyed, and 38% of all respondents specified that they wished to take a romantic vacation with her. Among Québécois respondents specifically, Céline was the most desirable travel companion. Among all female respondents, she was also the second most desired travel companion, trailing only Oprah.<sup>302</sup>

Ironically, despite being celebrated as Canadians, both Céline and Shania are far from Canadian in certain respects. As Edwardson points out, Céline, “signed to Columbia and Epic, recorded abroad and lived in Florida before following in the footsteps of crooners Paul Anka and fellow Quebecker René Simard by relocating to Las Vegas.” Shania, for her part, “signed with Mercury Nashville Records and recorded *The Woman in Me* with famed British producer Robert ‘Mutt’ Lange, with whom she lived in upstate

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<sup>301</sup> Jubas, 576-77.

<sup>302</sup> “Move Over Hollywood, Canadians Would Rather Travel With Their Own Northern Stars,” July 10, 2012, [http://leisure.travelocity.ca/Promotions/0,,TCYCA%7C7154%7Cmkt\\_main,00.html?WA1=05010&WA2=facebook&WA3=celebsurvey&utm\\_source=social&utm\\_medium=facebook&utm\\_term=pr&utm\\_content=celebsurvey&utm\\_campaign=facebook](http://leisure.travelocity.ca/Promotions/0,,TCYCA%7C7154%7Cmkt_main,00.html?WA1=05010&WA2=facebook&WA3=celebsurvey&utm_source=social&utm_medium=facebook&utm_term=pr&utm_content=celebsurvey&utm_campaign=facebook) (accessed March 12, 2013).



New York (before moving to Switzerland).<sup>303</sup> Shania even told reporters at the 1996 Grammy Awards that she “never really was aware of the border” between Canada and the U.S. and, furthermore, that she “like[s] to keep it that way.”<sup>304</sup>

Stars like Céline and Shania are all but forced out of Canada not just due to the necessity of growing their fan bases in larger countries but also quite pragmatically due to Canada’s unfavourable tax structure. As Potter describes, “Canada’s antiquated taxation laws ... force mega-moneymaking stars to move offshore if they want to keep even a pittance of their earnings.”<sup>305</sup> The fact that so many Canadian stars like Céline and Shania live abroad results in seeming injustices in the arena of Canadian governmental arts awards like the Governor General’s Awards. As Randy Bachman of iconic Canadian band The Guess Who puts it,

It’s like Canada gives these awards to people who have moved away. They still say they’re from Canada because it’s really hip and cool to say you’re from Canada, but they haven’t been here for years .... We give these people awards and shower them with accolades because they used to live in a tent outside of Timmins, Ontario. It’s cuckoo.<sup>306</sup>

But at the same time, one wonders how—with all the cards seemingly stacked in favour of a U.S.-based career—a Canadian musician could feasibly have a career based entirely out of Canada.

Despite being offshore cultural producers, Céline and Shania benefit not just from Canadian arts awards but also from the Canadian Radio-television and

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<sup>303</sup> Edwardson, 214.

<sup>304</sup> Shania Twain, quoted in Edwardson, 214.

<sup>305</sup> Potter, 184.

<sup>306</sup> Randy Bachman, quoted in Potter, 184-85.

Telecommunications Commission's MAPL system. Under this system, much of their music qualifies as Canadian content (by meeting two of the following criteria: Canadian music, Canadian artist, Canadian performance, Canadian lyrics) and receives high levels of radio airplay. Céline and Shania evidently remain 'ours' somehow despite the international trajectories of their lives and careers, simply by virtue of having been born here.<sup>307</sup>

### *Cultural Exports*

With the powers of multinational labels behind them, Céline and Shania have proved themselves to be some of Canada's most translatable cultural products. The question of why some musicians cross borders more quickly and easily than other has no clear answer. While Céline and Shania have both managed to cross many borders in their careers, other Canadian musicians have not been able to even break into the American market, the perceived launch pad to the world.

Beloved rock band The Tragically Hip, for instance, is all but ignored outside of Canada. While their music contains some lyrical references to Canada, overall it sounds "decidedly American—simple, crunchy, riff-heavy rock 'n' roll in Southern swamp rhythms with raw juke-joint appeal." With a degree of nationalist sentiment, Potter hypothesizes that The Tragically Hip is simply "*too good* for America—they've not only inherited a hand me down world from the biggest manufacturers of garbage on the planet, they've recycled it to fit their own design, thereby beating their Yankee peers at their own game." For Americans to embrace the band, he speculates, "would be an admission of

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<sup>307</sup> Edwardson, 242.

defeat.”<sup>308</sup> Why, then, aren’t Americans intimidated in this way by Céline and Shania, two pop stars who have achieved the power to command the globe?

According to Potter, there is a clear point of demarcation between bands like The Tragically Hip, Blue Rodeo, Cowboy Junkies, Copyright, and Sloan (which he characterizes as “real”) and the likes of Céline, Shania, Bryan Adams, Sarah McLachlan, and Barenaked Ladies (which he implicitly deems to be fake). Potter argues that Americans have embraced these latter artists because their lack of authenticity makes them “non-threatening,” while the former “real” bands “cut too close to the bone.”<sup>309</sup> This is a questionable argument insofar as Canadian pop stars in the vein of Céline and Shania have certainly posed threats, particularly from a commercial standpoint as veritable one-person empires amassing millions upon millions of dollars from their American careers alone.

Seemingly, for Potter, only sell-outs can be commercially successful, while “real” artists remain hidden gems. He labels Canada’s global pop stars “products rather than artists,” but then attempts to backtrack, writing that “This doesn’t make Bryan Adams any less a master craftsman or kd lang a marginal rather than a great singer; nor does it stop Shania Twain or Celine Dion from doing whatever ... it is they do that, judging by the number of people who spend good money on it, must be agreeable if nothing else.”<sup>310</sup> Evidently, his attempt to backtrack winds up in sarcasm where Shania and Céline—the most commercially successful artists he mentions—are concerned.

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<sup>308</sup> Potter, 193.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 182-83.

Rob Bowman identifies Albertan country singer Aaron Lines as another case study in the challenges of musical border-crossing. Bowman speculates that perhaps the reason why his music has never translated for American and international audiences in the way that Shania's has is that, while a skilled musician, he has not created and filled a new niche for himself within country music as she has. Ultimately, though, Bowman maintains that "there's no easy explanation for why somebody could become big here and not there."<sup>311</sup>

But one thing is clear for him. Since the time that Alanis Morissette became huge in the United States, he says, Canada has "been on a roll" with "massive artists" from Shania and Céline to Avril Lavigne and now Justin Bieber. Intuitively, Bowman says he suspects that this recent wave of Canadian global superstars has something to do with the enhanced global communications networks provided by the contemporary mediascape, from "the internet breaking down all geographical borders" to "the marketing of music now as much through television, movies, video games, and advertising."<sup>312</sup>

But why have Céline and Shania specifically been such successful cultural exports? With regard to Céline, Bowman is quick to note that he "personally couldn't care less about her" but acknowledges that the "purity of her voice, her ability to sustain notes, the clarity" is undeniable. Moreover, he believes that her Québécois roots perhaps even enhance her appeal, rendering her exotic in the vein of French movie stars and pop vocalists like Edith Piaf. Céline's international success is especially notable in light of the fact that Québécois music generally stays in the province. As Bowman explains, while "French-speaking Canada arguably hears the majority of Anglo-Canadian hits, the

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<sup>311</sup> Bowman, telephone interview.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

majority of Anglo-Canada does not hear what are hit records in Quebec.” Many Québécois musicians “are unbelievably massive in that province and often also sell well in France and for some other French-speaking areas,” but remain virtually unknown outside of those domains.<sup>313</sup>

With regard to Shania, Bowman suggests that her videogenic physical qualities have been key to her success. She is “good-looking by a certain beauty stereotype in this day and age where visual ... is more dominant than it ever was—and that’s true for men and women, but I would say even more for women.” Nonetheless, in contrast to Céline with her one-in-a-million vocal abilities, Bowman says he would not likely have predicted Shania’s success had he been asked to assess her potential prior to her rise to fame: “Would I have seen Shania two years before she became famous and for some reason think ‘this woman has a shot’? Uh... I would’ve said, well, maybe.” Realistically, many factors beyond a degree of talent must be in place in order for a musician to rocket to superstardom, from visionary management to effective marketing to American connections.<sup>314</sup> Céline had a savvy manager behind her to “translate” her image for the global masses, while Shania had a renowned music producer behind her to “translate” her sound.

### *Vegas Stars*

Céline and Shania are far from the first Canadian pop stars to venture to Las Vegas. Ontarian crooners Bobby Curtola and Paul Anka were among the first Canadians to be offered multimillion dollar contracts for Vegas performance runs. Québécois pop singer René Simard also had runs in Vegas. Potter devotes an entire chapter of *Hand Me*

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<sup>313</sup> Bowman, telephone interview.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

*Down World: The Canadian Pop-Rock Paradox* entitled “Bound for Vegas” to the phenomenon of Canadian musicians taking their acts to the Strip. Writing in 1999, Potter explains that “Canadian entertainers have plenty of ‘ins’ in Vegas—contacts to make sure the bookings are appropriate and the job gets done right.” Paul Anka, he observes, “virtually runs the town,” while Bobby Curtola “is still packing ’em in for the \$3.99 sirloin special at some steak joint down the strip from The Tropicana.” Prophetically, he writes,

Fear not, Bryan, Shania, Celine, kd and Sarah—there will be room for each of you at the end of the line. They’ll probably even be able to slide in Alanis, Barenaked Ladies and Crash Test Dummies in between fire-eaters and sword-swallowers at Circus Circus, or at least as warm-up acts for Siegfried and Roy’s freakish white felines over at The Mirage.<sup>315</sup>

As is evident from Potter’s derisive tone, the perception of stars performing in Las Vegas was once far from positive. From his 1999 vantage point, Vegas is “Wayne Newton territory, home of the Rat Pack and the kind of place where Frank Sinatra’s sweat-stained boxer shorts are worshipped like the Shroud of Turin.” It is the place where Elvis “waddled off to die.” All in all, it is “where you go when your shelf-life expires. It is a noble admission of defeat, an acknowledgement of growing old and throwing in the towel, an implicit understanding that the glory days are gone once and for all. It’s not graceful but it’s lucrative.” He concludes that “For big-time entertainers, all roads eventually lead to Vegas.”<sup>316</sup>

According to John Nelson of AEG Live, Céline all but eliminated this negative

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<sup>315</sup> Potter, 182.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

stereotype with her massively successful *A New Day*... production. The classic Vegas attraction, he points out, used to be Cirque du Soleil. Now, he believes, it is Céline.<sup>317</sup> Shania is following in her footsteps and those of Cher, Bette Midler, Elton John, Rod Stewart, and other entertainers who have been lured to Caesars in Céline's wake. From a 2012 vantage point, Jon Caramanica proclaims in a review of Shania's show that Vegas "doesn't necessarily mean the end, not anymore." Today, "It's a town of summation, site of neither genesis nor graveyard. For a singer a residency here isn't merely a sinecure for the once-was but a confirmation of cultural saturation. If you can make it here, you've made it everywhere."<sup>318</sup> Céline and Shania, then, *are* culture.

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<sup>317</sup> Nelson, personal interview.

<sup>318</sup> Jon Caramanica, "Rebound, as Demure as Ever," *New York Times*, December 2, 2012.

## Conclusions

In the Adornian sense, mainstream popular music is an assembly-line product no different than the computer or paper you are reading this on. From a postmodern perspective, it is bona fide art essentially equal to a Picasso painting or a Rodin sculpture. But my research shows that Céline's and Shania's music and personae are far more than symbols of corporate cultural infiltration and modern-day art for the masses. They are global social practices, travelling from recording studios to music listeners in unimaginably different circumstances. Indeed, Céline and Shania are polysemic, polyvalent entities. McLuhan suggests that the medium is the message and the message,<sup>319</sup> but technological packaging aside, pop stars are as corporeal as Bach and Mozart before them. Their producers are just as real, though part of a music industry more widely and complexly networked than ever before. The same is true of fans, despite the masses they form at arena shows and in virtual communities.

Nonetheless, Céline and Shania exert the power of pathos upon audiences. They are not unlike propaganda in this respect. Like propaganda, they are also what you choose to make of them, whether from a passively critical perspective, an actively critical perspective, a passively accepting perspective, or even an actively accepting perspective. In 1939, the New York-based Institute for Propaganda Analysis published a list of "tricks of the trade" in their classic text *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (1939). The propaganda strategies they identify are name-calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain

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<sup>319</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 237.



folks, card stacking, and bandwagon.<sup>320</sup> Both Céline and Shania wield all of these strategies with powerful efficacy. But they most prominently exhibit three of them: glittering generality, transfer, and plain folks.

The glittering generality strategy, according to *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, involves “associating something with a ‘virtue word’ ” so as to encourage people to “accept and approve the thing without examining the evidence.” Virtue words like love, family, and nation “*mean different things to different people; they can be used in different ways.*”<sup>321</sup> Both Céline and Shania wield the power of glittering generality by refraining from singing about anything concretely personal and focusing instead on broad, widely relatable concepts like these. The vast majority of their musical output deals with the topic of love, and one can insert oneself into their love equations however one desires due to the lack of personal detail. Céline’s heart will go on, and Shania feels like a woman. Millions of people can relate to these sentiments, in a seemingly infinite variety of ways.

Moreover, being glamorous superstars, Céline and Shania are as glittery as they are abstract, giving literal meaning to the term ‘glittering generality.’ While a politician might deliver his generality from a simple podium, Céline and Shania belt out theirs from spectacular stages. What is more, popular music in itself can be conceived of as a glittering generality. As Erin Hurley explains, pop is “the genre of music that has labored longest under the labels of ‘inauthentic’ and ‘derivative,’ due to its hyper-commercialization, its lack of political edge, and its capacity to fabricate stars regardless

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<sup>320</sup> See Institute for Propaganda Analysis, *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin’s Speeches*, ed. Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1939).

<sup>321</sup> Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1939), cited in Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 102.

of their musical ability.”<sup>322</sup> Céline and Shania thus take the glittering generality strategy not just to spectacular heights but also to commercial heights.

Transfer, the second propagandist strategy that both Céline and Shania frequently exhibit, involves attaching “the authority, sanction, and prestige of something respected and revered ... to something else in order to make the latter acceptable.”<sup>323</sup> Céline and Shania draw on transfer as a career-boosting strategy in a number of ways. For instance, they associate themselves with Oprah to acquire some of her personal relatability with the television-watching masses. They point to other iconic musicians such as Barbra Streisand (Céline) or Dolly Parton (Shania) as sources of inspiration. They also derive cultural legitimacy by association with their powerful husband-collaborators.

Plain folks, the final propagandist strategy that both Céline and Shania ritually display, is “the method by which a speaker attempts to convince the audience that he and his ideas are good because they are ‘of the people.’”<sup>324</sup> By opening up their family lives to the public through such channels as reality TV-style documentaries, interviews, and their Vegas shows, Céline and Shania present themselves as ordinary human beings. They position themselves as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters who just happen to be superstars.

But of course audiences play an active role in all of this. Fans make Céline and Shania stars by listening to their music and purchasing concert tickets. Stars present themselves in a certain way, but fans and critics alike recreate them in their own minds. Indeed, pop stars and their music are unfinished products. Individual listeners are left to

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<sup>322</sup> Hurley, 142.

<sup>323</sup> Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1939), cited in Marlin, 103.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

fill in the blanks, invited in by their glittering generalities, appealing transferred traits, and plain folks pretenses.

Aesthetic theorist Arnold Berleant explains that “Our auditory imagination ... supplement[s] the decaying sound of a piano tone, contributing to the sounds that are actually heard, and hearing the inaudible by sometimes supplying notes that are unheard.” Likewise, he points out that Roland Barthes conceives of “the listener as a reader performing the music, indeed, composing it a second time.”<sup>325</sup> The same kind of process plays out in sociocultural terms with pop stars. Clearly, Céline’s and Shania’s music is not just injected into global culture. It is interpreted and used in a plurality of ways.

At the same time, there are not as many Célines and Shanias as there are fans and critics of them. There is indeed a certain “mental set that orients the reading of a given generation,” which reception theorist Hans-Robert Jauss terms the “horizon of expectations.”<sup>326</sup> As a result, one would neither interpret Céline’s “My Heart Will Go On” as a biomedical statement of some kind nor interpret Shania’s wedding song “From This Moment On” as a funeral march. Paradoxically, then, the meaning of their music and personae is both fixed and fluid. Céline and Shania are fill-in-the-blanks. But as with Céline’s multilingual oeuvre and Shania’s multigenre albums, there is inevitably a finite array of options to choose from.

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<sup>325</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 94.

<sup>326</sup> Hans-Robert Jauss (1970), cited in Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 3.

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