CHAPTER 12

Queer Jewish Divas: Jewishness and Queerness in the Life and Performance of Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, and Olga Guillot

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The divas have to make us believe that they live in their own sphere and that the norms and conventions that apply to everyone, do not apply to them.1

The intersection of Jewishness and queerness has been investigated by several Queer theorists.2 This essay looks at a particular musical/cultural aspect of this intersection—the great American Jewish divas—who became “gay icons” and subjects of female impersonations in drag shows. In the following pages, I will present three such Jewish divas who have risen from and become immersed in the two popular music cultures that this volume looks at—the North American and the Latin American. This essay explores their popularity and particular “gay appeal” covering the entire spectrum of American popular music. From the United States, Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler, both in their seventies now, are global divas and gay icons idolized and drag-impersonated in both Latin and Western cultures; less known for her Jewish roots due to the particular circumstances of her Cuban background is pan-Latin bolero diva Olga Guillot.

All three divas have a life story and performance that resonate well with Mira’s descriptions of the diva and “the way she inhabits her own myth.”3 Camp, drama, and “over-the-top performance” are typical of the stage personas of all three divas, from Streisand’s vocal melodrama, via Midler’s outrageous comedy and camp, to Guillot’s heartbreaking boleros and quivering lips.


2 Many of them of Jewish descent, such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, and Daniel Boyarin.

3 In Knights, 4–5.
But there are other common factors relating to their biographies, careers, and interaction with the audience that make them typically “Jewish” and “queer.”

I begin this essay by reviewing the historic connection between queerness and Jewishness and by studying the cases of the three Jewish divas who became major gay icons in their respective cultures. My objective is to examine and to compare issues of gender, social acceptance, Diaspora, Jewish fatalism and camp, religious and political non-conformism, and queerness.

**Jewishness and Queerness, Judeophobia and Homophobia**

In the introduction to their edited volume *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini draw an interesting comparison between Jewishness and queerness and claim that they are “bound up by one another in particularly resonant ways.”

An interesting aspect of this queer/Jew connection is discussed by Boyarin in a 1997 study entitled *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, in which he identifies expressions of “soft” Jewish masculinity in the Talmud and succeeding rabbinical texts, and claims that a certain kind of male effeminacy helped maintain Jewish self-affirmation against the hegemonic gentile (Roman at the time) virtues of male masculinity. This “soft” Jewish masculine tendency continued throughout the history of life in exile and, according to Boyarin, was challenged by Herzl and the Zionist movement with their idealized “muscular Jew,” which later became part of the macho ethos of the State of Israel.

This “soft masculine” behavior and presentation became one of the triggers for the “feminization” and “queerification” of the Jew, as presented by European Judeophobes. Another factor was circumcision: “…little boys hear in the nursery that Jews have something cut off their penises and thereby conclude that they are men who become women.” This “lack of penis” is another trigger for contempt toward Jews, associating them with femininity, deviance, and homosexuality.

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6 Boyarin, 169.