

Lana Del Rey's Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass: The Camping of American Poetry

Auteur : Hilgers, Antoine

Promoteur(s) : Delville, Michel

Faculté : Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres

Diplôme : Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation germaniques, à finalité approfondie

Année académique : 2022-2023

URI/URL : <http://hdl.handle.net/2268.2/19345>

Avertissement à l'attention des usagers :

Tous les documents placés en accès ouvert sur le site le site MatheO sont protégés par le droit d'auteur. Conformément aux principes énoncés par la "Budapest Open Access Initiative"(BOAI, 2002), l'utilisateur du site peut lire, télécharger, copier, transmettre, imprimer, chercher ou faire un lien vers le texte intégral de ces documents, les disséquer pour les indexer, s'en servir de données pour un logiciel, ou s'en servir à toute autre fin légale (ou prévue par la réglementation relative au droit d'auteur). Toute utilisation du document à des fins commerciales est strictement interdite.

Par ailleurs, l'utilisateur s'engage à respecter les droits moraux de l'auteur, principalement le droit à l'intégrité de l'oeuvre et le droit de paternité et ce dans toute utilisation que l'utilisateur entreprend. Ainsi, à titre d'exemple, lorsqu'il reproduira un document par extrait ou dans son intégralité, l'utilisateur citera de manière complète les sources telles que mentionnées ci-dessus. Toute utilisation non explicitement autorisée ci-avant (telle que par exemple, la modification du document ou son résumé) nécessite l'autorisation préalable et expresse des auteurs ou de leurs ayants droit.

Université de Liège
Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département de Langues et Lettres Modernes

**Lana Del Rey's *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*:
The Camping of American Poetry**

Mémoire présenté par Antoine HILGERS en vue de l'obtention du grade de
Master en Langues et Lettres Modernes, orientation germanique, à finalité approfondie

Promoteur : Michel DELVILLE
2^{ème} Lectrice : Lieselotte BREMS
3^{ème} Lecteur : Claus TELGE

Année académique 2022-2023



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must express my heartfelt gratitude to Michel DELVILLE for agreeing to supervise this dissertation. Throughout my years at the University of Liège, his lectures have consistently stood out as the highlight of my studies.

I would also like to thank my father, Philippe HILGERS, and my mother, Marie-Pierre MONTULET, to whom I owe my life and my name, both of which would have prevented me from writing this dissertation.

I am forever indebted to Léontine SIWEK, whose sole presence has been a source of strength in my life. Like an older sister, her influence and wisdom accompany me wherever I go, and together we have weathered the storms of life's challenges like true baddies.

And finally, I must thank Joachim MINDER, who taught me what poets never could.

This is for God. This is Camp.

Jesus is my bestest friend

— Lana Del Rey

CONTENT

PREFACE.....	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
1.1. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” – To be or not to be Camp?.....	2
1.2. Hollywood Sadcore – Toward a DelReyesque Camp.....	5
2. POEM ANALYSES	12
2.1. Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass	12
2.2. Bare feet on linoleum	16
2.3. What happened when I left you	24
2.4. LA Who am I to Love You?.....	31
2.5. The Land of 1000 fires	39
2.6. Never to Heaven	46
2.7. Tessa DiPietro	50
2.8. Past the bushes Cypress thriving	54
2.9. SportCruiser.....	59
2.10. Quiet Waiter Blue Forever	63
2.11. My bedroom is a sacred place now – There are children at the foot of my bed	66
2.12. In the hills of Benedict Canyon.....	69
2.13. happy / Sugarfish / ringtone	71
2.14. In the flats of Melrose	74
2.15. Thanks to the Locals.....	78
2.16. Paradise is Very Fragile.....	81
2.17. Salamander.....	85
2.18. haikus / notes for a poet	88
3. CONCLUSION.....	89
Works Cited.....	91

PREFACE

It is not the purpose of this dissertation to present a comprehensive and detailed overview of the persona and character that is Lana Del Rey, the stage name of Elizabeth Grant. Likewise, this dissertation does not intend to provide a critical evaluation of her work or artistic merit. Rather, it aims to conduct a literary analysis of her 2020 poetry book, *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*, while delineating her distinctive aesthetic, her overarching imagery and iconography, which I contend aligns with the Camp sensibility, as defined by Susan Sontag. This attempt to analyze *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass* in relation to Camp will allow me to answer questions raised around notions of authenticity in Del Rey's work, but also to explore issues surrounding its labeling and categorization.

Through short, individual analyses of the poems and their accompanying paratextual elements, this dissertation will also assess the extent to which one can adopt a Camp reading of Del Rey's poetry. In this context, materials external to the main object study, such as song lyrics, stage performances, and interview excerpts, will be integrated into this dissertation, as they will provide a more nuanced understanding of Del Rey's aesthetic. Such an approach also aims to identify specific patterns in her work, namely her tendency to recycle motifs, which will subsequently be used to support my main thesis.

To explore the legacy of Camp effectively and establish a preliminary outline of Del Rey's aesthetic sensibilities, it seems relevant to start this dissertation by providing a summary of Susan Sontag's seminal essay "Notes on Camp" (1964), which emerges as the entry point into the complex concept that is Camp. This dissertation will also draw insights from a non-exhaustive corpus of academic literature centered on Del Rey, from which I will draw critical conclusions to strengthen my arguments.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" – To be or not to be Camp?

In her groundbreaking 1964 essay, titled "Notes on Camp," the esteemed American writer and critic Susan Sontag argues for the emergence of a new form of sensibility, which had scarcely been theorized prior to her academic intervention. This openly rebellious stream of taste, which goes by the name of Camp, tends to surface in moments of socio-cultural instability, when "the adoption of style—as such—has become altogether questionable" (Sontag 529). Often understood as a transgressive response to mainstream culture, Camp is not something one can easily pigeonhole into a series of formal traits and features. As a fluid model with no fixed definition, Camp eludes proper theorization. Worse still, the very act of acknowledging Camp—of defining it, of naming it—renders it altogether dull and lifeless, for no one "who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it" (Sontag 515). In such a state of contradiction lies the essence of Camp, and any attempt to define it, even intuitively, seems futile. Not everything qualifies as Camp; it is "not *all* in the eye of the beholder" (Sontag 517).

"To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it" (515), as Sontag herself explains in her essay, which, while advocating for a less intellectual approach to art, consists of fifty-eight rigidly structured paragraphs that tend to take on philosophical overtones. If Camp was once an underground mode, seemingly divorced from any other type of representation, it has now become a part of "the mainstream, where—through a process of gradual integration and assimilation—it has remained ever since" (Bolton 1), losing much of its subversive potential in the process. The term has become increasingly conventionalized in recent years, a tendency epitomized by the 2019 exhibition at the Met Gala, the annual fundraising gala for the Costume Institute at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, which centered on Sontag's essay and contributed to the (over)simplification (and vulgarization) of Camp.

As nebulous and broad a concept, Camp is not all elusive. Sontag's "Notes on Camp" still offers a theoretical framework to discuss and better understand this cultural phenomenon. For one thing, it defines Camp as a form of sensibility that consists in perceiving the world as a continuous aesthetic phenomenon—it is a wholly artificial way of interpreting things, "not in terms of beauty, but in terms of style" (Sontag 517). This view is also shared by Thomas Meehan, who sees in Camp "the curious attraction that everyone—to some degree at least—has for the bizarre, the unnatural, the artificial and the blatantly outrageous" (30). Sontag

believes that the defining characteristic of Camp is “the spirit of extravagance” (522), which translates into a mode that thrives on the use of overstated, exaggerated, and theatrical elements. What counts is “the style in which ideas are held” (Sontag 527), and the primacy of style over content, of beauty over morality, is therefore essential.

For this reason, Fabio Cleto argues that Camp tends to fall into contradictions; it is at once “self-conscious and splendidly unaware [...], popular and obscure, elegant and cheesy, affected and spontaneous, passionate and detached, endearing and outrageous” (13). Camp combines antithetical elements “not so much to reconcile them, but to collapse their opposition into a cognitive whirlwind of transitions” (Cleto 13). Camp pinpoints the boundary between these seemingly unreconcilable opposites as their exact point of intersection: “One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (Sontag 527). Camp introduces a more nuanced relationship to seriousness by promoting “artifice” and “theatricality” as new ideals, which it deems more adequate than “traditional means [of] going beyond straight seriousness—irony, satire” (Sontag 527). In doing so, Camp exposes previously overlooked subject matters:

[A]nother kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human—in short, another valid sensibility—is being revealed. And third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling. (Sontag 526)

Such is the essence of Camp; it is an artwork that takes itself seriously, yet cannot be taken as such because it is *too much*—there is “something *démesuré* in the quality of the ambition, not only in the style of the work itself” (Sontag 523). The purest examples of Camp spring from an irrepressible, nearly uncontrolled sensibility that can only find success when it fails passionately. The trademark of Camp is thus the ability to turn these apparent failures into an original gesture of sincerity, one that has the proper combination of exaggeration, passion, and naiveté.

One would be mistaken in thinking that anything considered “bad taste” automatically falls into the realm of Camp. Not every instance of Camp can be reduced to a failure of taste. Something is Camp not because it lacks artistic merit, but because its exaggeration reveals something about the artificial nature of the world itself. It falls into an unintentional form of self-deprecating humor, even when it addresses more profound issues, transforming solemnity

into a new kind of irony. Camp finds pleasure in representing emotionally charged motifs, regardless of their quality—the appeal then lies in the ability to find an ironic meaning in such contexts. Camp’s relationship to kitsch is therefore a close one: “Many examples of Camp are things which, from a ‘serious’ point of view, are either bad art or kitsch. Not all though. Camp is not necessarily bad art” (Sontag 518).

Another fallacy would be to assume that Camp attempts to elevate these “failures” to a higher level of artistic significance. Camp does not try to reverse things and argue that “the good is bad, or the bad is good” (Sontag 525). It rejects the good-or-bad axis of judgment altogether, which allows for an entirely new set of criteria, one that promotes the existence of “a good taste of bad taste” (Sontag 530). Besides, Camp remains above all “a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment” (Sontag 530). It refrains from mocking those “who succee[d] in being seriously dramatic” (Sontag 513). Instead of judging, Camp sincerely admires the awkward, though passionate intensities of someone’s character.

For Camp is the glorification of character, more specifically the “instant character,” understood by Sontag as “a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing” (525). What Camp appreciates most is “the unity, the force of the person” (Sontag 525), that is, a certain flattening (as opposed to development) of character. The examples Sontag offers to better understand this “Being as Playing a Role” (519) are Old Hollywood movie stars, whose flamboyance forms the basis of Camp mannerisms:

In every move the aging Martha Graham makes she’s being Martha Graham, etc., etc. This is clear in the case of the great serious idol of Camp taste, Greta Garbo. Garbo’s incompetence (at the least, lack of depth) as an *actress* enhances her beauty. She’s always herself. (525)

This passage reveals another fundamental aspect of Camp, namely its deeply sentimental relationship with the past. Camp holds in high esteem elements that are old-fashioned and generally outmoded. It is not a love of the old as such, but rather a “necessary sympathy” associated with the passing of time: “Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility” (Sontag 524). Pamela Robertson notes that Camp functions in a “productively anachronistic” fashion, rendering “specific historic norms obsolete” (4), as it enters popular culture to borrow and adopt a range of styles, regardless of the period to which they belong. This ties in with Sontag’s argument that Camp particularly responds to “the coarsest commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses” (528). Just as it

ignores the conventions of the past, Camp bypasses the norms of high culture, which allows for an appreciation of the simplest pleasures. Camp makes no distinction between the unique and mass-produced object; it “transcends the nausea of the replica” (Sontag 528) to make vulgarity an aesthetic value in its own right—a value that becomes enjoyable, even touching, precisely because it is unpretentious.

Given these complexities, it is worth asking at this stage if analyzing Del Rey’s work through the lens of Camp is a sensible option, hence the title of this section—To be or not to be Camp? Various facets of Del Rey’s persona, such as her vocal style, her public image, and her music videos, have already been the subject of academic papers, though they remain few and limited, desperately needing further study. Still, these papers are surprisingly reminiscent of Sontag’s theoretical framework, unintentionally applying the characteristics of Camp to Del Rey’s work. While the scholars who have already studied Del Rey provide an undeniably solid foundation, without which I would not have been able to complete this dissertation, I contend that analyzing Del Rey’s aesthetic through the lens of Camp could enrich the conclusions reached thus far.

1.2. Hollywood Sadcore – Toward a DelReyesque Camp

If Del Rey excels in promoting a distinctive aesthetic, it is less assured that her style is the subject of constant reinvention, as most of her works exhibit recurring (if not systematic) stylistic features, which are practically to be expected when a new project of hers is released. And yet, defining these characteristics proves difficult, though a first common denominator in all projects undertaken by Del Rey would be the fierce spirit of extravagance they present. The way she engages with the world alone could easily be categorized as Camp. An adequate representation of how much of an anomaly Del Rey is within the landscape of contemporary popular culture would be her various appearances during the summer of 2023.

Following the release of her eighth major-label studio album in March, the elaborately titled *Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*, Del Rey performed in a series of festivals across Europe and South America, with a couple of solo shows in the United States. If she previously stated that she would no longer perform her song “Ultraviolence” (2014), in part because of its controversial lyrics, such as “He hit me and it felt like a kiss” (0:41-0:45), she could be seen this year punching herself in the face while singing the choruses of the song. During her live performances of “Candy Necklace” (2023), one of the singles from her latest album, she hypes herself up rapper-style between the verses, humming “Get it, get it, get it,” before serving up one of the most troubling lines of her discography: “Sittin’ on the sofa, feelin’

super suicidal / Hate to say the word, but, baby, hand on the Bible, I do” (1:53-2:01). Typically, these shows ended with her performing “hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have – but I have it” (2019), a song that describes her experience with the music industry and how it almost drove her to madness. During the outro, her dancers wrap her in a white, camisole-like sheet before lethargically dragging her off the stage. These performances are to be considered alongside the headlines they generated, many of which revolved around the way Del Rey often paused between her songs, asking fans to find her missing vape, from which she occasionally takes puffs on stage (Brandle). The luckiest fans, however, could run into her working a shift at Waffle House. In a viral video posted on Twitter, Del Rey is seen working behind the counter of one the American restaurant chains, serving people wearing a full employee uniform, name badge included, and singing Christian hymn “Amazing Grace” to customers (Dailey).

As scholars have pointed out, much of her aesthetic can be defined by the contrasts it tends to produce—the aforementioned elements themselves form a stark contrast against the more glamorous aesthetic she strives to convey. Laid-back and languorously hypnotic, she pushes her “mélange of banality, glamour, and reverence for low-class aesthetics” (Bess 9) to excess, celebrating American suburbia with disaffected essentialism. Her lyrics make her play both the ingénue and the femme fatale, a girl-next-door suddenly turned beauty queen. She is the feminine mystique reimagined; she is America’s sweetheart, yet identifies “more closely with the American whore than the American dream” (Joannou 12). If scholars tend to focus on the Americana imagery of her earlier works, her more recent releases offer equally striking contrasts. Whereas she infamously promoted herself as a “gangsta Nancy Sinatra” or a “Lolita lost in the hood” (Bess 8) at the beginning of her career, she calls herself a “24/7 Sylvia Plath” on her sixth studio album, the outrageously titled *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* (2019). On the title track of her latest album, she compares herself to the now-sealed Jergins Tunnel sitting under Ocean Boulevard, asking her partner not to forget her the way the tunnel has been:

Open me up, tell me you like it
Fuck me to death, love me until I love myself
There’s a tunnel under Ocean Boulevard
Don’t forget me (3:27-3:45)

Most of the contrasts Del Rey produces derive from her vast repertoire of cultural references, which range from sentimental to mundane, from niche and obscure to insanely mainstream. Her

exploitation of outside references has been remarkably consistent in her career, becoming a prominent stylistic feature of her work. That being said, her juxtapositions only make these references coexist alongside each other. When superimposed, they tend to sow discord, giving rise to a paradigm “full of pop-symbolism that refuses to signify” (Siddiqi 4). Her references often lose whatever original meaning they previously had, at times to the point of absurdity.

Her song “Cola” (2012), particularly its opening lines, emerges as a first example to illustrate this point: “My pussy tastes like Pepsi Cola / My eyes are wide like cherry pies” (0:18-0:26). If these comparisons are in keeping with her Americana imagery, they create an unintentional comedic effect that only emphasizes their idiosyncrasy. These lines take a contentious turn, however, in light of the pre-choruses: “Harvey’s in the sky with diamonds and he’s making me crazy / I come alive, alive / All he wants to do is party with his pretty baby” (0:35-0:50). In this part of the song, Del Rey changes the title of the Beatles’ psychedelic song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” to reference disgraced Hollywood director Harvey Weinstein, to whom she tentatively confirmed the song is about:

When I wrote that song, I suppose I had like a Harvey-Weinstein-Harry-Winston-type of character in mind. I envisioned, like, a benevolent, diamond-bestowing-upon-starlets visual [...]. I’m not really sure. I thought it was funny at the time. (12:27-12:54, MTV News)

That Del Rey portrays herself as Weinstein’s “pretty baby” is rather disconcerting, especially since it echoes the highly controversial movie *Pretty Baby* (1978), which revolves around a male photographer’s relationship with a twelve-year-old girl. This intertextual layering, deliberate or not, raises doubts as to whether “Cola” parodies or praises its subject matter—if anything, the earlier comparisons undermine the seriousness of any other sexual themes the song potentially addresses.

As for “Ultraviolence” (2014), the title track of her sophomore album, it also features a series of seemingly discordant references:

Ultraviolence
I can hear sirens, sirens
He hit me and it felt like a kiss
I can hear violins, violins
Give me all of that ultraviolence (1:06-1:28)

The song and the album take their name from *A Clockwork Orange*, the 1962 dystopian satire by Anthony Burgess, famously adapted into a film by Stanley Kubrick in 1971. Whereas the term “ultra-violence” originally refers to the extreme and unjustified violence the characters in the novel endorse, Del Rey re-uses it to suggest her finding pleasure in being abused—a sadistic tendency she conveys through yet another reference, quoting 1960s girl group The Crystals and their hit song, “He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)” (1962). In the choruses, Del Rey draws a parallel between her relationship and the emotions often associated with the sound of violins and sirens, the latter also alluding to the sirens of approaching authorities, the ultra-violence of her man being such that someone has to call the police or an ambulance. The “Jim” to whom Del Rey dedicates the song—“Jim raised me up, he hurt me but it felt like true love / Jim taught me that / Loving him was never enough” (1:46-2:02)—is presumed to be Jim Morrison, the singer of the Doors, with the song therefore being about his tumultuous relationship with Pamela Courson. At the same time, the lyrics might be a reference to Jim Jones, the infamous preacher who orchestrated a mass murder-suicide in the 1970s, since Del Rey describes this man as her “cult leader”¹ (3:25).

These examples are but a brief outline of Del Rey’s cultural repertoire; however, it is worth noting that many of her songs recycle the same references. For instance, on the song “Ultraviolence,” she briefly alludes to Robert Frost’s poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” (1923), which comments on the passing of time and the inevitability of loss:

Heaven is on Earth
I would do anything for you, baby
Blessed is this union
Crying tears of gold like lemonade (2:55-3:12)

She later quotes the title of the poem on “Music to Watch Boys To” (2015), though this time she also quotes *herself*, repeating her lemonade-lyric: “Nothing gold can stay / Like love or lemonade / Or sun or summer days” (3:26-3:46). The line reappears four years later on her song “Venice Bitch” (2019), with Del Rey using it to evoke the end of the summer in a similar way: “You’re in the yard, I light the fire / And as the summer fades away / Nothing gold can stay” (0:49-1:00). The more the reference is used, the more its original significance diminishes; it

¹ In the music video for her song “Freak,” originally intended to be the music video for “Ultraviolence,” Del Rey dances around a hippie, guru-like man, before taking an acid patch and drinking Kool-Aid from a red plastic cup—the followers of Jim Jones died by drinking Flavor Aid mixed with cyanide.

soon becomes a self-referential motif. Her references become “copies of copies of copies [...], a kind of horrible Platonic cave” (Crutcher 249) or a Baudrillardian masterclass in hyperreality.

The aesthetic of Del Rey is therefore best understood as a “mash-up of simulacra,” interweaving together “relics of the past to create something that is ‘new’ and yet simultaneously isn’t” (Fortescue). This asynchronous mismatch of references still serves a purpose: the creation of an aesthetic experience. Even when they are stripped of their original meaning, these references retain their emotional charge. They form the basis of a unique aesthetic, guaranteed to leave a long-lasting impression:

Sometimes it seems people miss the fact that, with an artist like Del Rey who has deliberately and painstakingly constructed a quasi-cinematic universe of overlapping nostalgias, that coherency of atmosphere helps to solidify this imagined plane. (Fortescue)

These references help her establish a “complex myth-building,” in which “the claustrophobia of constant repetition, the reliance on mutable symbols so ubiquitous that they have been stripped of meaning, and a heightened sense of intertextuality” (Fortescue) are instrumental in promoting her aesthetic. These aesthetic strategies recall the observations Umberto Eco made on the movie *Casablanca* (1942), which he describes as a successful attempt to combine unsuccessful clichés:

When only a few stock formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire of formulas is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi’s Holy Family Church — the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius. (6)

Whether her aesthetic strategies are the result of meticulous craftsmanship or not is therefore irrelevant; the constructed is a norm inherent to the work of Del Rey, and this very quality is what makes it Camp. The authenticity in her extravagance sets her apart:

When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion. Just as extreme pain meets sensual pleasure, and extreme perversion borders on mystical energy, so does extreme banality allow us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime. Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. (Eco 11)

Evidence suggests that Del Rey produces her contrasts unintentionally, that “her role is deeply sincere and largely uncritical” (Crutcher 250). When she enumerates a list of clichés on her song “Old Money” (2014), for instance, she succeeds in creating an oversaturated, yet successful aesthetic because she engages so wholeheartedly with these otherwise trite references, making these talk among themselves: “Blue hydrangea, cold cash divine / Cashmere, cologne, and white sunshine / Red racing cars, Sunset and Vine” (0:00-0:22). In every move she makes, Lana Del Rey is being Lana Del Rey; she is always herself—her “awkwardness is so intense that it overwhelms her beauty, even though beauty usually reads as competence” (Black 11).

Drawing from these examples, I contend that Del Rey’s aesthetic resonates with that of Camp, not merely for its extravagance and over-the-top qualities, but also for its ambiguous juxtaposition of cultural references, which turns literary giants such as Robert Frost and pop icons like Jim Morrison into bunkmates—a confluence of influences that confounds irony with sincerity. If her work is laden with introspection, her self-awareness at times verges on the absurd. Del Rey once described her aesthetic as “Hollywood Sadcore” (Siddiqi 4), an inherently Camp designation. Alternatively, one might label it as “DelReyesque Camp,” for its distinctive style and innate Camp qualities.

It should come as no surprise that her debut poetry collection, *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*, released in September 2020, embodies the essence of “DelReyesque Camp.” A physical manifestation of her aesthetic, it stands as a testament to previously discussed ideas. This 128-page hardcover book, which contains over twenty poems, a series of archival and original photographs, and other paratextual elements, was released alongside a spoken-word album, on which Del Rey recites fourteen of her poems. While exploring the defining characteristics of Camp, this dissertation will also explore a deeper narrative thread running throughout the collection—the journey of the female narrative voice, implicitly considered to be (a reflection of) Del Rey herself, as she becomes a poet. Through individual analyses of the

poems and their accompanying paratextual elements, this dissertation will uncover the nuances of “DelReyesque Camp,” in addition to the transformations the speaker undergoes throughout the collection.

2. POEM ANALYSES

2.1. Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass

By opening her poetry book with its eponymous poem, Del Rey grants “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass” a manifesto-like value. This brief vignette, which touches upon themes characteristic of Del Rey’s body of work, such as (the uniquely American obsession with) freedom and independence, describes the speaker entering a party skeptical of herself. She contemplates the infinitude of options at her disposal, each of which she “weigh[s] quietly” (line 7). Her perspective suddenly shifts when she notices a child doing a backbend in a garden—a seven-year-old girl named Violet, whose unbridled enthusiasm catches her off guard and disrupts her carefully laid plans.

The achingly romantic title instantly sets the flowery tone of the collection. Prior to reading the poems, readers are left to wonder whether Violet refers to a person or a flower. If readers come to think of Violet as a person, the title implies that she is “bent backwards,” an unintentional, though inevitable sexual innuendo on the part of Del Rey. This adds a layer of surprise to the revelation that Violet is, in fact, a child; it results in a freeze-frame that inspires astonishment as much as resentment.² This ambiguity is in keeping with the essence of Camp, which relies on “gestures full of duplicity” and “flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation” (Sontag 521). Such contrasts emerge in the very first stanza:

I went to a party
I came in hot
made decisions beforehand
my mind made up
things that would make me happy
to do them or not
each option weighed quietly
a plan for each thought (lines 1-8)

If the phrase “came in hot” (line 2) suggests her arriving to the party with great enthusiasm, it also implies a lack of readiness, the narrative voice being nervous or perhaps unprepared for

² From a popular culture point of view, “Violet” is the name of the twelve-year-old prostitute in the movie *Pretty Baby*, which (horribly) fits with the most disconcerting connotations of the title.

this social event. The enjambment and lack of punctuation in the following lines introduce yet another paradox; despite considering every conceivable option, she claims to have her “mind made up” (line 4). In the accompanying spoken-word album, Del Rey heightens the ambiguity by marking a brief pause between these fourth and fifth lines, raising further doubts as to their meaning. Additionally, she recites this first stanza with a consistent pattern of two stresses per line, causing her voice to sound somewhat restrained. Coupled with these short, punctuation-free lines, her delivery conveys a sense of haste, mirroring the apprehension of her narrative voice.

The sight of Violet eventually changes her perception of this party. She interrupts her contemplative thinking and takes a moment to observe her surroundings—a shift that causes her thoughts to slow down in the subsequent stanzas:

But then i walked through the door
past the open concept

and saw Violet
bent backwards over the grass
7 years old with dandelions grasped

tightly in her hands
arched like a bridge in a fallen handstand
grinning wildly like a madman
with the exuberance that only doing nothing can bring (lines 9-17)

The speaker gradually loosens up her rhythm, giving rise to longer lines with irregular breaks. This change in structure also impacts the actions depicted in the poem, as the words in the book are themselves bending, mimicking what Violet is doing. In contrast to the first stanza, which sees her struggling with indecision, she now resolves to do nothing: “and in that moment / i decided to do nothing about everything / forever.” (lines 19-21). In the hardback edition, a dozen empty lines separate the ending couplet from this final word—a layout choice that provides readers with a breathing space, an opportunity to take a pause along with the speaker and Violet. The presence of uncapitalized first-person pronouns in the second and fifth stanzas, at odds with the capitalized ones in the first, are further indications of this transformation, which symbolically ends with the poem’s final (and sole) punctuation mark.

Although Violet radiates youthful innocence, her incongruously “grinning wildly like a madman” (line 16) reads like a horror movie scene happening in an otherwise innocuous environment, leaving room for interpretation. Most striking is the speaker’s wish “to do nothing about everything / forever” (lines 20-21), which itself seems oxymoronic. One needs to account for this ending, which suggests agency as much as abandon. It is attested that the “inability to act and the portrayed feeling of paralysis is a re-occurring image in several poems” of the collection, with the speaker indulging in “a self-chosen paralysis” (Tauer 7) in this first poem. Emancipation from this state is made possible by becoming a poet, which in the collection “means both regaining control over paralysis and giving creative identity the possibility to evolve” (Tauer 9). As such, “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass” lays the foundation for the journey that the speaker undertakes throughout the collection, wherein she progressively gains confidence in her poetic abilities.

Because of “its exposed placing in the book” (Tauer 7), this poem must be analyzed in relation to Del Rey’s other works. Flowers are a recurring motif in her discography, which includes several songs that mention violets specifically, including “Violets for Roses” (2021). In this song, Del Rey confronts an abusive boyfriend who tries to change her in the name of love, thereby trading something as wild as a violet for something as common as a rose:

You made me trade my violets for roses
You tried to take all the pink off my toes, and
God knows the only mistake that a man can make
Is tryna make a woman change and trade her violets for roses (1:11-1:34)

This man forces her to give up all her possessions, even seemingly trivial items, such as her nail polish. In response, she celebrates her newly found freedom and everything she treasured before this relationship, including herself: “Ever since I fell out of love with you, I fell back in love with me” (0:21-0:28). In contrast to mass-produced roses, violets grow freely in nature and are therefore often associated with wildflowers, another type of flower to which Del Rey compares herself on “Wildflower Wildfire” (2021), a song also from her album *Blue Banisters*:

Baby, I’ll be like a wildflower
I live on sheer willpower
I’ll do my best never to turn into something
That burns, burns, burns (1:43-2:03)

The song conveys her longing for a life guided by her own choices, with Del Rey drawing a parallel between these aspirations and the resilience of wildflowers, which bloom despite adverse conditions. Similarly, the narrative voice of “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass” finds comfort in watching the young girl picking dandelions—a type of wildflower coincidentally featured in the image next to the poem. The image, a close-up shot of two dandelion seed heads lying in a pool of weeds and mowed grass, lacks technical precision; its simultaneous overexposure and out-of-focus qualities convey a sense of spontaneity that should recall the essence of the poem to which it is affiliated.

Del Rey frequently incorporates intentionally deteriorated images into her work. In her music videos, she combines worn-out film stock, VHS recordings, and Old Hollywood movie clips with retro-looking videos of herself. As aesthetic strategies, they “render the mediation partly precarious, often in ways that effect sensations of nostalgia” (Fetveit 188). This interest in amateurish, nostalgia-laden images aligns with the spirit of Camp, which “brings forth ‘accumulations of debris from the recent past’ [...] to be admired, reproduced and treasured” (Torres 339). Because it has “always been fascinated with, and has fashioned itself on, the outmoded, the out of date, the artifact past its prime” (Flinn 55), Camp gravitates towards aesthetically pleasing, albeit imperfect visuals, sorting through “the cultural junkyard with an abjection magnet, seizing upon discarded-but-still-glittering bits of debris” (Lowder). Evidently, Del Rey’s obsession for “vintage dresses and obsolete media” (Fetveit 202) is not all superficial; it is inherently tied to the sentimentality that such nostalgia tends to conjure up, the image next to the poem being a prime example of this.

In this regard, her lullaby “Cherry Blossom” (2021), featured on the same album as the two previous songs, is particularly interesting, as it explores the themes of “Violets for Roses” and “Wildflower Wildfire,” though this time it equates the idea of being wild with dandelions:

Swing it high like Jesus, wild and free
Dandelions in your hair, baby
You’re very brave
And there’s much to see (1:01-1:25)

Infused with vaguely religious references, the song is dedicated to a child named “Angelina” (2:48-2:50), whom she alternatively describes as “wild,” “free,” and “brave.” As in previous examples, in which wildflowers stand for willpower, she urges the young girl to grow without

letting others constrain her, much like a cherry blossom, which seems to be the affectionate nickname she gives this child.

Accordingly, the references Del Rey makes to wildflowers in her songs, particularly to violets and dandelions, perfectly fit with the pastoral motif of the poem; these flowers evoke a sense of freedom, a sensation Del Rey associates with nature and the idea of living a wild and untamed existence. When her narrative voice notices Violet spontaneously doing a backbend with “dandelions grasped / tightly in her hands” (lines 13-14), it causes her to gather herself and change her attitude. To this extent, it seems Violet embodies (or personifies) what these flowers symbolize in Del Rey’s lyrics, namely the yearning for an unapologetically free-spirited life, unburned by societal constraints. These ideas recall the statements Del Rey herself has made about the poem:

I remember one time I had been sitting waiting for some food, and I started thinking [about “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass”]. And I thought, Am I Violet? That is a family name. Is that a little bit of karmic lineage coming in? I definitely think that writing my poetry was the beginning of a more psychic, energetic opening to my family of origin [...]. It’s a reminder to stay serene and balanced, which is really my priority: that psychological, spiritual preservation.
(W Magazine)

That the eponymous poem starts the collection is therefore not insignificant, since it helps introduce one of its central themes, namely the search for peace in the face of doubt, what Del Rey names “psychological, spiritual preservation.”

2.2. Bare feet on linoleum

If “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass” seems to end with a definitive resolution, the second poem in the collection sees the speaker’s mind drifting away in increasingly concerning directions, which calls her resolutely deciding “to do nothing about everything” into question. The speaker now develops a more apathetic, detached attitude—a “self-chosen paralysis” (Tauer 7) arguably more appealing than the previous overwhelming prospect of making a plan for each thought. While she might find comfort in this form of self-indulgence at first, the cryptic ramblings and unsettling progression of “Bare feet on linoleum” point towards an imminent breakdown, hinting that such a mindset might in fact be damaging for her well-being.

The eleven short stanzas follow a typical stream-of-consciousness style, presenting the seemingly unrelated thoughts passing through the speaker's mind via alliterative, slow-moving words. As she allows her mind to wander between anecdotal and more personal matters, her associative leaps become increasingly unclear, which results in an inner monologue that makes little sense upon first reading—Sylvia Plath, Amy Winehouse, Catalina Island, the Sonoma County wildfires, and Mount Rushmore become all entangled in her biographical rampages. For all that, it remains clear that the source of this turmoil is a suffocating feeling of doubt, exacerbated by her shift of perspective in the first poem, which now leaves her “wondering where to go from here” (line 20). Her ominous daydream abruptly ends in the final stanza, with the speaker regaining consciousness once she feels her bare feet on the kitchen's linoleum floor, becoming aware at once that she was half-mindedly “[c]utting vegetables over boiling water” (line 31) all along.

Rather than being wholly spontaneous, her obscure, multitudinous observations are in fact related, forming a coherent and meaningful ensemble influenced directly by her actions in the present. Indeed, the poem maintains coherence and consistency in its imagery, bringing various ideas together using a water metaphor, as if the speaker's boiling water over a stove impacted her thought process, pervading her personal memories and altering them along the way. To this extent, the imagery is most interesting when read as a self-reflexive device, the water mirroring her sense of indecision, with her frustration reaching its boiling point by the end of the poem.

The poem mostly alludes to unpleasant experiences holding the speaker back in the past, which leaves her debating whether to keep these private matters to herself or make them public. The first stanza sees her invoking troubled poetry icon Sylvia Plath to help her resolve this dilemma: “Stay on your path Sylvia Plath / don't fall away like all the others” (lines 1-2). The reference should be understood in light of the speaker's surroundings, specifically her preparing dinner over a kitchen range. Looped in her thoughts, she begins to intertwine her personal issues with Plath's tragic end, one of the most common associations made with the late poetess being her suicide, caused by inhaling the fumes from a gas stove. The picture adjacent to the poem, which features Del Rey's personal stove, topped with a small bouquet of pink flowers, seems to confirm this interpretation.

That Del Rey integrates the image of a gas oven to illustrate her poem is so outlandish, so outrageous, that it can only be the work of Camp; it almost serves as a shrine dedicated to the poet, helping her narrative voice channel Plath from beyond the grave. Set against this picture, the reference takes on a morbidly absurd quality, propelling it into the realm of Camp.

Del Rey uses such references “not to make them fresh, exactly—no shout-out to Sylvia Plath can feel new, not since about 1981—but to put them in our faces as old friends, old adversaries” (Powers). She draws on collective memory to conjure up the emotions associated with these familiar cultural symbols, giving rise to an aesthetic prioritizing style over content:

Del Rey reduces Sylvia Plath to her trademark madness—the most “instantly and effortlessly identifiable” aspect of the late poet. In doing so, Del Rey diminishes Plath’s aesthetic value for the sake of her own melodrama. It’s the irresistible combination of low aesthetic intensity with high emotional intensity; it’s not the real Sylvia Plath, but more like a take on Alvy Singer’s ugly assertion in *Annie Hall* that Plath’s suicide “was misinterpreted as romantic by the college girl mentality.” (Madden)

By invoking Plath this way, Del Rey reduces her legacy to a convenient symbol of madness, dumbing her down to a caricature that fits her narrative.

A haunting presence, this constructed version of Plath progressively takes hold of her mind, initiating a knotty interweaving of fiction and reality that culminates in her mentioning her “watery grave” in the second stanza, falsely implying that the poet died at sea: “Don’t take all your secrets alone to your watery grave about / lovers and mothers” (lines 3-4). Though inaccurate, the image is quite effective, as it denotes an underwater place where someone has drowned to death—a concept that, if taken metaphorically, relates to the speaker’s situation. Indeed, repressing uncomfortable thoughts and feelings might weigh her down, leading her to *sink* or, as she herself puts it in the next stanza, keep her in deep:

The secrets you keep will keep you in deep like father and Amy
and brother
And all of the people you meet on the street will reiterate lies
that she uttered (lines 5-8)

Before providing readers with a chance to make sense of these lines, she deviates from her initial path in the subsequent stanzas, offering instead a short aside that gives her water imagery a new direction:

Leave me in peace I cry
late at night on a slow boat bound for Catalina for no reason

tiny beads of sweat dot my forehead
could be mistaken for dewdrops if this were photo season. (lines 9-12)

Rather than invoking joyful spontaneity, her randomly taking a boat trip at night suggests impending doom—a feeling heightened by her misremembering Plath dying at sea. Besides, the enjambment and lack of punctuation in these two stanzas initiate various interpretative possibilities, each darker than the one before, which further heightens the overall sense of distress in this poem. The speaker might be quietly sobbing alone or, more worrying still, screaming out loud in the middle of the night, imploring someone tormenting her to leave her in peace. It also remains unclear whether she weeps or embarks on the cruise for no reason; the idea that she unexpectedly starts to sweat, sensing that something is off, without being able to perceive what this might be, is another equally frightening possibility. While a definitive meaning is not clear, alongside continuing the water imagery, the lines maintain the impression that she experiences a wide-awake nightmare, waking up late at night in cold sweat after dreaming of escaping to Catalina Island—the “beads of sweat” (line 11) and “dewdrops” (line 12) on her forehead might stem from her sensing the boiling water.

Following this aside, the speaker returns to “a real life” (line 13), which allows her to develop previously unfinished ideas and tentatively reveal the source of her concerns:

But alas this is a real life — and it’s been a real fight just to
keep my mind from committing treason.
Why you ask?
Because she told the townspeople I was crazy and the lies they
started to believe them (lines 13-17)

The preceding stanzas suggest her knowing that keeping secrets buried in deep will cause her mind to commit treason; however, if she reveals her secrets and goes against the woman spreading lies about her sanity, she risks not being believed, especially since the townspeople have started to side with this person—they now “reiterate” (line 7) and “believe” (line 16) her lies. As she explores the options at her disposal, the speaker grows numb to her surroundings. Unable to move forward, she takes refuge in her thoughts, compliantly following her decision

to do “nothing about everything.” She involves readers in her decision-making, thereby passing responsibility to someone else and letting others do the pondering: “Why you ask?” (line 15). In this respect, daydreaming allows her to dither over possible alternatives, while preventing her from making a final decision—a coping mechanism, which, to a certain extent, constitutes another form of treason against her mind.

In light of the above, it becomes increasingly difficult not to think of *The Bell Jar* (1963), the semi-autobiographical and only novel written by Sylvia Plath, especially its iconic fig tree passage, which epitomizes the identity crisis of Esther Greenwood, the main character and aspiring poet who slowly descends into madness as she comes to terms with her potential life paths:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet [...], and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. (73)

Much like Esther, who cannot decide on a professional career, the speaker feels overwhelmed by the possibilities laid out before her. Paralyzed by indecision, both start to witness their actions from afar; Esther sees herself starve to death, while the speaker imagines sinking into a watery grave. The comparison is not so far-fetched insomuch as Del Rey is clearly familiar with the excerpt, as evidenced by a recent interview, in which she associates the fig tree with the idea of motherhood:

[T]he question of whether she will carry the family line on by being a mother and when (and whether marriage and love is included in that) appears multiple times across [*Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*]. As for maternal yearnings, she'll only talk about the passage in *The Bell Jar* [...]. “It's giving fig tree,” says Del Rey. “It's giving Sylvia Plath, so many figs and if I don't pick one first, they'll all wither away and then there will be no figs to choose from.” (Rolling Stone UK 60)

Taking all these elements into account, “Bare feet on linoleum” emerges as a reimagining of “Daddy” (1965), perhaps the most well-known poem by Plath, with the speaker directing her words towards her mother. To support this claim, one needs to consider Del Rey’s audio-recording of the poem, specifically the way she glosses over the words “mother” and “father” in the second and third stanzas. Through this self-reflexive gesture, by which Del Rey refrains from mentioning specific family members, she conveys the impression that her speaker is reluctant to reveal secrets, perhaps in fear of family repercussions. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to identify the deceitful woman in the poem as the speaker’s mother. Under this interpretation, the poem portrays the dilemma and subsequent hesitancy she faces vis-à-vis her mother, whether she should violate her integrity or hers.

As if to add another layer of complexity, Del Rey also marks a pause after mentioning the name “Amy” in the third stanza. Similar devices exist in her song “Get Free” (2017), which she wrote “about people who don’t get to reach their full potential because they let controlling people stop them from being free” (World Café, 33:05-33:18). The song is most striking for its inclusion of two redacted words:

I’m doin’ it for all of us
Who never got the chance
For - and for - (shut up, shut up)
And all my birds of paradise (shut up, shut up)
Who never got to fly at night (shut up, shut up) (0:55-1:19)

The initial version of the song, which Del Rey claims was “really revealing,” ended up being “deleted completely then started from scratch,” as she believes that “it would have been hard for [her] to do interviews if [she]’d said a couple of particular things [she] was thinking of” (BBC). Since then, Del Rey has replaced these words with “Amy” and “Whitney” during live performances of the song, in reference to two of her inspirations, the late Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston, whose names she has tattooed across her collar bones. More importantly, her repeated insistence on having to “shut up,” given the origins and meaning of the song, coupled with her decision to redact certain words in its final recording, reads ironic. Even though this song is her “modern manifesto” (0:51-0:55) for change, it also details her struggle to move forward:

Sometimes it feels like I've got a war in my mind
I want to get off, but I keep ridin' the ride
I never really noticed that I had to decide
To play someone's game or live my own life (1:25-1:43)

Afraid of what will happen if she speaks her mind, the narrative voice experiences a similar mental battle—the “real fight just to / keep [her] mind from committing treason” (lines 13-14)—that results in her editing the audio-recording of her poem.

An unexpected shift emerges in the subsequent stanzas, as the speaker claims that she has moved on from such issues, although the poem results from her tendency to over-analyze and dwell on them:

But anyway — I've moved on now

And now that I've gone scorched-earth
I'm left wondering where to go from here.
To Sonoma where the fires have just left?
South Dakota? (lines 18-22)

Symbolic of this sudden change is the scorched-earth imagery, which not only runs counter to the prevailing water metaphor, but also alludes to the term “scorched-earth policy,” a military strategy that consists in the destruction of any supply useful to an invading force, even if this entails burning all vital resources. The image presents self-destruction as an act of defiance, an opportunity for the narrative voice to rise from the ashes—a sentiment that aligns with her subsequent reference to the Sonoma wildfires. The idea of escaping to where “the fires have just left” (line 21), considering the associations it creates with the myth of the phoenix, instills hope for change, suggesting that she is now ready to make her decision.

And yet, the speaker instantly falls back into her old ways in the subsequent stanza, pondering yet more options:

Would standing in front of Mont Rushmore feel like the Great
American homecoming I never had?
Would the magnitude of the scale of the sculpture take the place
of the warm embrace I've never known? (lines 23-26)

The lines are imbued with a sense of desperation, the presidential statues becoming surrogates for an emotional lack. Just when it seems like she is ready to move forward, she finds herself dwelling on the past; however, the fact that she never got to experience an “American homecoming” (line 24) or any “warm embrace” (line 26) growing up proves her past offers no hideaway. It is worth noting that, much like “Daddy,” the speaker draws on cultural symbols—the way she conveys her disquiet through Mount Rushmore somewhat echoes Plath’s depiction of her father as a “[m]arble-heavy” (line 8) and “[g]hastly statue” (line 9) in her poem.

The recording of the poem becomes most unsettling towards the end of its run, as the various samples playing throughout gradually overlap, creating a maddening cacophony of voices that reaches its climax in the final stanza:

Or should I just be here now
In the kitchen
Bare feet on linoleum
Bored — but not unhappy
Cutting vegetables over boiling water that I will later turn
into stew. (lines 27-32)

The background instrumentation combines siren sounds, violin strokes, and unintelligible remarks seemingly directed at the speaker, such as “People love your stories” or “You have plenty of interesting stories.” The soundtrack abruptly stops once the final line is uttered, and Del Rey slowly fades into this uninterrupted chorus of voices, whispering these compliments back as if she were mesmerized—a rather dramatic ending that intensifies the moment of revelation, namely that the speaker merely prepares dinner in the kitchen.

If “Bare feet on linoleum” contains sincerely moving reflections, the style (of both the poem and its audio-recording) is “excessive—a value judgement itself, but one that speaks of a distinct element of exaggeration or gaudiness, or (in slightly less ideologically-laden terms) theatricality” (Jarman-Ivens 190). In true Camp fashion, this theatrical style conceals a deeper meaning. The inflated lines, hypnotic background vocals, and incantatory references to Plath should be regarded as more than mere ornamentation; rather, they function as distress signals. The narrative voice falls into a deeply meditative, dream-like state, marked by anxiety-ridden contemplations, which see her ponder whether she should retain painful secrets or free herself from the burden of carrying them. By the end of these contemplations, she understands that the longer she dwells on the matter, the deeper she sinks into her watery grave. Ready to commit

her unspeakable treason, she starts repeating compliments to herself, as if trying to convince herself that her stories are indeed worth telling, despite what the townspeople might say about her. In this regard, the placement of the poem is significant, as it informs readers that the subsequent pages will reveal such secrets, the entire collection being a compilation of vulnerable stories about “lovers and mothers” (line 4).

It is worth mentioning that Del Rey has used her songs in recent years to criticize her mother.³ Most striking in this context is “Fingertips” (2023), on which she asks, “What kind of mother was she to say I’d end up in institutions?” (3:47-3:54), with the word “mother” being partially censored through a reverb-like effect. In the same song, she alludes to her attempting suicide by drowning, which lends the water imagery of the poem an even more gruesome meaning: “When I was fifteen, naked, next-door neighbors did a drive-by / Pulled me up by my waist, long hair to the beach side / I wanted to go out like you, swim with the fishes” (3:13-3:33). Similarly, her song “Wildflower Wildfire,” mentioned in the previous section for its pastoral motif, offers another deeply intimate confession:

My father never stepped in when his wife would rage at me
So I ended up awkward but sweet
Later then hospitals, stand still on my feet
Comfortably numb, but with lithium came poetry (2:32-3:02)

The song suggests that one can flourish through poetry, with release from a “comfortably numb” state being possible through the transformative power of writing—a recurring theme in the collection, as poetry becomes an integral part of the speaker, helping her manage her personal issues.

2.3. What happened when I left you

Next in the collection is “What happened when I left you,” which describes how life opened up for the speaker after her relationship ended. The breakup, which occurs prior to the events narrated in the poem, contributes to a spiritual awakening, a change in character that sees her acting more freely, as though she had finally found the feeling of spontaneity that she longed for in the last two poems. Tinges of strength and independence are already found in the title, as it implies that the speaker is the one who decided to part ways.

³ She sings “I’m not friends with my mother, but still love my dad” (2:33-2:40) on “Black Bathing Suit” (2021) and “I haven’t seen my mother in a long, long time” (0:43-0:48) on “A&W” (2023).

The poem finds her having a pleasant time in the afternoon with friends. Her life now seems peaceful, which is a sensation she communicates from the very first lines through an excessive (and sophisticated) use of alliterations, creating a whimsical mood that goes along with the fancy location she tries to describe: “Perfect petals punctuate the fabrics yellow blue / silver platters with strawberries strewn across the room” (lines 1-2). The mention of “perfect petals” (line 1) conjures up the image of flowers blossoming, suggesting springtime and the renewal of seasons, with all the implications this entails on a metaphorical level, while the presence of “silver platters” (line 2) and “green embroidered chairs” (line 23) indicates a place of wealth. This is confirmed by the subsequent one-line stanza, “In Zimmerman [*sic*] with sandals on one summer dress to choose” (line 3), which references a high-end fashion store known for its sophisticated, flower-patterned dresses, which Del Rey often wears on stage. If the breakup leaves the speaker with “nothing much to do” (line 20), she claims to enjoy this newfound serenity. Having overcome her troubled state of mind, her sole concern is now which dress to buy. The lines are adorned with stereotypical symbols of femininity, such as flowers, fruits, embroideries, and dresses, which help create a distinctively feminine, albeit superficial lexical field, delivering snapshots as banal as they are opulent:

Three girls
eyes rolled
loud laughter
dust specs lit by afternoon (lines 4-7)

The attitude displayed by the trio echoes that of Violet, the seven-year-old girl introduced in the first poem. The speaker, who vows to liberate herself from her anxieties after encountering this child, now seems to challenge the same youthful exuberance, laughing out loud with her eyes rolled as she leisurely tries on dresses with girlfriends in a luxury store.

The signs of this new attitude become more apparent in the next two stanzas, in which she even celebrates the absence of her ex-boyfriend:

My life is sweet like lemonade now there's no bitter fruit 🍉
eternal sunshine of the spotless mind
no thought of you

My thoughts have changed
my voice is higher
now i'm over u (lines 8-13)

By referencing *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), a sci-fi drama movie directed by Michel Gondry, in which the two main characters undergo a medical procedure to erase their memories of each other, the speaker suggests her trying to forget her former partner once and for all. This decision transforms her entirely; not only are her thoughts different, but so is her voice. Once erased from her memory, this man becomes little more than an informal “u,” which suggests her being free from his influence.

At first glance, “What happened when I left you” departs from the themes explored in previous works, as this poem details the speaker’s recent independence and the favorable consequences of her leaving someone who has complicated her life. A seemingly optimistic poem, it also marks a departure from her overriding feeling of indecision, which allows her to take control of her relationship and separate from her partner; however, closer examination suggests that the healing process is not yet complete, with the threat of an inner conflict never far away. Support for this statement first comes into view with the line “no thought of you” (line 10). Because this negative presupposes its positive counterpart, readers cannot but infer that the speaker still has her ex-boyfriend in mind, especially since the poem is dedicated to him. Her claim that “life is sweet like lemonade” (line 8) is also open to a double meaning, since lemons are more sour than sweet. The absurd, seemingly misplaced watermelon emoji is equally confusing; it not only conflicts with the vintage typewriter font, but also the intended meaning, since watermelons are anything but bitter. These elements could be considered in keeping with the light-hearted tone of the poem, the argument being that the use of an emoji introduces a touch of humor, enhancing the overall sense of spontaneity, while the lemonade-metaphor references the proverbial phrase, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Still, there seems to be some confusion in the use of these elements. Once combined, they desaturate their respective meanings, forming a confused amalgam of falsely optimistic clichés, which, ironically enough, gives the impression there are still bitter fruits in her life.

If Camp often gives rise to witty wordplays, revealing “the twofold, shifting, playful nature of puns” (Cleto 13) in the process, it remains that these mainly occur in spite of (rather than because of) their author’s efforts. As such, these so-called ironic, multi-layered elements tend to be unintended by-products. An example of this would be the song “Radio” (2012), on which Del Rey sings that her life has become “sweet like cinnamon” (0:47) ever since she

became famous. Because cinnamon tastes bitter, critics and fans alike have interpreted this line as a subtle nod to the downsides of fame, with Del Rey lamenting how strangers only “love [her] ‘cause [she’s] playing on the radio” (0:53-0:55). And yet, Del Rey has stated in interviews that she enjoys having people treat her differently:

People always said, “Oh, people will come out of the woodwork and change their mind about you, they’ll start to like you because you’re on the radio,” and it’s true, but I don’t mind, because I’d rather have people be nice to me, so I liked it. I don’t really care why people are nice to me, I just like it when it’s easier. (Massive Arts 1:49-2:06)

If “Radio” calls for a critical examination of fame, it does so (largely) unintentionally. From this emerges that Del Rey’s work falls under the realm of *naïve* Camp, described by Sontag as “unintentional” and “dead serious” (521). This interpretation would align with Scott Long’s observation that one cannot but adopt “a conscious misreading” (64) when encountering naïve Camp, finding irony where it might not have been intended.

Against this backdrop, it seems necessary to qualify the reference to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a line itself taken from Alexander Pope’s heroic epistle “Eloisa to Abelard” (1717). Written as a letter from Eloisa’s perspective, it displays her inability to reconcile her romantic desires with her commitment to a life of piety. Even after spending years in a convent, her love for Abelard remains unwavering, leading to the situation where her attempts to forget this man only intensify her longing for him:

How happy is the blameless vestal’s lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot:
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each prayer accepted, and each wish resigned; (lines 207-210)

While Pope’s poem concludes that one cannot erase the memories of a once-beloved partner, the film takes this idea a step further, suggesting that any attempt to do so is futile. That the speaker uses this reference to suggest that she has forgotten her ex-boyfriend therefore seems counterproductive, since both the film and the poem emphasize the impossibility of achieving what she claims. The presence of contradictions in this poem is such that one comes to believe that the speaker is not over this person. If anything, Del Rey’s penchant for clichés and purple

prose only adds to this tension. From this perspective, the Camp sensibility emerges as a solution to the aesthetic challenges inherent to her work:

One ‘reads’ the camp object, wherever it came from, as though it were deliberate (hence laughable): taking its contradictions to heart, as it were. Nearly any camp object can be read as kitsch, if we assume that its maker did not know what he was doing [...]. Likewise, nearly any kitsch object can be read as camp, if we take its tastelessness as deliberate. (Long 64)

If one were to read the hyperbolic language and alliterative riffs of the poem as deliberate, one could interpret these as an attempt by the speaker to feign contentment and well-being—as if these displays of happiness were forced, serving to conceal greater preoccupations. Under this interpretation, the speaker crafts an elaborate performance to distract herself from the pain of the breakup. Engaging in seemingly mundane activities, such as shopping with girlfriends, therefore allows her to keep these unresolved feelings in deep. One could even argue that the mention of “silver platters” (line 2) summons the presence of *Sylvia Plath*, as both share visual and phonetic similarities—an element that, given the manifest presence of the poet in the previous poem, her association with repressed memories and negative feelings, would strengthen this interpretation.

Accordingly, it should not go unnoticed that the second half of the poem moves away from its initial whimsical imagery, delivering instead enigmatic references reminiscent of those found in “Bare feet on linoleum”:

No flickering in my head movies
projected in Bellevue

Because I captured the mood of my wish fulfilled
and sailed to Xanadu (lines 14-17)

A first interpretation would lead one to read these first two lines as an extension of the cinematographic reference, the memories the speaker once had of her boyfriend, flickering in her head like a worn-out movie, no longer troubling her. Noteworthy for this analysis is that Del Rey has an unreleased track titled “Bellevue” (2009), in which she plaintively sings her love for a man who remains distant and uninterested in her charms. The particularly uncanny

vocals are complemented by her crying out amidst unsettling background noises, “He doesn’t want me around,” a line she repeats a dozen times throughout the run of the song. For all that, the most unsettling part of the song comes in the second verse: “Baby, in Bellevue I had no one / And I could go back to being a lush again” (0:34-0:46). The New York Bellevue Hospital, which seems to be what Del Rey references in this song, is one of the oldest and largest public hospitals in the United States. Originally established as a psychiatric facility, it has retained a sense of mystery, if not controversy in popular culture. This reputation mostly stems from its historical mistreatment of mentally ill patients, among whom were Allen Ginsberg (Harris), who even cites the hospital in his poem “Howl” (1956), and Sylvia Plath (Hilton). Though subtly integrated into the poem, this passing mention of “Bellevue” raises concerns, as it implies that the narrative voice is still haunted by flickering memories of her troubled past.

Equally important for this analysis is “Patent Leather Do-Over,” the first (and only) poem Del Rey has released from her yet-to-be-released second poetry book, titled *Behind the Iron Gates—Insights from an Institution*. First shared via her Instagram account, the poem reads like another personal letter addressed to Sylvia Plath. Its speaker details her admission into a facility following her attempt to make her “body plunder from high sea cliffs” (line 19), in what appears to be a disturbing tribute to the late poet:

Sylvia,
I knew what you meant when you talked about swimming in the ocean and leaving
your patent leather black shoes pointed towards it while you swam [...]
That’s why I’m now at this facility by the ocean
And why I go barefoot and why I go calmly
Why I leave my shoes up by the stairway
I do it for you, and I do it for me (lines 1-2; 7-10)

While the links between this poem and “Bare feet on linoleum” are relatively straightforward, the explicit mention of a psychiatric institution allows for a more reliable comparison with the Bellevue Hospital, whose historic wrought-iron gates are still visible today.

As for the reference to “Xanadu” (line 17), it introduces an equally vast field of intertextual possibilities. The term, famously mentioned in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s opium-induced poem “Kubla Khan” (1816), is usually associated with an idyllic place free from worldly responsibilities, as in the classic Hollywood film *Citizen Kane* (1941), in which the main character’s lavish estate bears this name. At first glance, its presence in the poem suggests

that the speaker has found inner peace. The line might also be a reference to the musical, roller-disco movie *Xanadu* (1980), which tells the story of a struggling artist living in Los Angeles, falling in love with Terpsichore, the muse of dance in Greek mythology. A box office disappointment, the film received negative reviews for its poor visual effects, laughable plot, and questionable acting performances. Despite its mixed reception, *Xanadu* has developed a cult following over the years, with fans appreciating its campy charm. To a certain extent, this unexpected appreciation could be likened to Del Rey's early reception in the media. At the time of her breakthrough, critics repeatedly downgraded her as a fraud or an industry plant. Without any doubt, the defining event in this premature labeling was her infamous first television appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in January 2012, during which she debuted her two hit singles "Video Games" (2012) and "Blue Jeans" (2012). The performance, which was met with harsh criticism, specifically for Del Rey's vocals and (lack of) stage presence, was evidence to critics that her sudden rise to fame was undeserved, if not orchestrated by her label. If *Xanadu* or Del Rey's early body of work were first dismissed by critics as shallow, both have since been reevaluated and appreciated for their over-the-top style and nostalgic appeal.

Whatever the case may be, this *Xanadu*-reference highlights a fundamental issue in the work of Del Rey, namely that it often "revels in incongruence" (Crutcher 242). Her large body of references, the "cultural heteroglossia she presents in her work" (Crutcher 237), which alternates between high and low-brow culture, ranging from Sylvia Plath to Jim Morrison, Robert Frost to Bruce Springsteen, is bound to cause confusion. These referents collide without ever merging into a unified whole, Del Rey treating them with "a kind of banal superficiality that may itself be contrived" (Crutcher 250). For this reason, one cannot but question whether she uses such references earnestly or incorrectly:

Whether she is a clever, serious actor in her own creation of an American grotesque, aware of its satire and of antecedents in the esthetic and literary traditions, or simply a product of the contemporary era, Lana Del Rey is notable in how she brings her romantic cultural pastiche into dialogue with cultural precedents. She holds a mirror to each person's individual understanding of religion, America, love, and beauty, and often the incongruence within her understanding strikes many as vulgar, disturbing, and grotesque. (Crutcher 251)

As with all things Camp, the effects produced by these "grotesque" aesthetic choices are far more relevant than the intent behind them—it is precisely because her work is "deeply sincere

and largely uncritical” (Crutcher 250) that it is Camp. As such, the ambiguities in this poem are not so much intentional as the effect resulting from (and revealed by) the extravagance of her emotions. And the result of this extravagance is that her narrative voice seems to make a spectacle of her own poetic efforts, as if these paradoxical statements were indicative of her troubled state of mind.

The final stanzas reinforce this impression, as she reveals that her happiness tends to be precarious and inconsistent, much like waves:

The grief that came in waves that rolled I navigated through

The fire from my wish as wind to future trip to Malibu

now everything I have is perfect

nothing much to do (lines 18-21)

In addition to establishing a relationship between grief and waves, which once again alludes to the preceding poem and its water imagery, the first line reads ironic—her claim to have successfully navigated periods of sorrow, considering what is discussed in previous pages, is more than uncertain. That she now enjoys having “nothing much to do” (line 21), although her feelings of paralysis and indecision cause her problems in previous poems, seems equally illogical. Besides, the photograph featured next to the poem, showing the roof of a pitch-black house, shaded by an overcast sky, contradicts the idea that she is entirely content, this image being nothing but ominous.

2.4. LA Who am I to Love You?

Promoted as the lead single from the spoken-word album, “LA Who am I to Love You?” stands out as one of the lengthiest works in the collection. In this vulnerable, self-admittedly pathetic tribute to “the city that dreams” (line 8), the narrative voice implores a fantastically personified Los Angeles to take her back after a temporary relocation to San Francisco—a hasty departure prompted by the fact that “the man who doesn’t love [her] / lives there” (lines 25-26). Across one hundred and thirty-two lines, Del Rey pushes her imagery to absurd, self-parodic extremes, portraying the city of Los Angeles as a cold-hearted boyfriend vaping in her bed, while making references to West Hollywood elite bar Delilah, Hancock Park, the Lake Shrine retreat facility on Sunset Boulevard, and even former Mayor of Los Angeles Eric Garcetti.

Without any doubt, the lines dedicated to “LA” pay homage to Allen Ginsberg’s poem “America” (1956). If the poems share similarities in their irregular meter, unconventional structure, and colloquial style, they also use the same literary devices, such as apostrophes, anaphora, and personifications. It is the first stanza, however, that bears the most striking resemblance to the original poem, with Del Rey expanding Ginsberg’s opening line, “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing” (line 1), into a series of relatively repetitive statements:

LA, I’m from nowhere who am I to love you
LA, I’ve got nothing who am I to love you
when I’m feeling this way
and I’ve got nothing to offer (lines 1-4)

In giving new meaning to the original work, Del Rey departs significantly from the themes explored by Ginsberg, such as the hypocrisy of the United States during the 1950s in terms of corruption and warmongering. The slightly clichéd, often disheveled rewriting strips the poem of its political resonance, reducing it to a simple, yet sincere love-letter. Del Rey is notorious for integrating references into her work that are “too ahistorical to be taken seriously,” which inevitably “removes the insistence upon them” (Siddiqi 4). For all that, her “appropriation of America’s most overexposed iconography” remains largely noncommittal, so that she is not “corrupted by faith in the image she offers” (Siddiqi 4). For instance, when her narrative voice proclaims that she has “complaints” (line 15), there is nothing political about it:

LA
I’m upset!
I have complaints!
Listen to me
They say I come from money and I didn’t and I didn’t even have
love and it’s unfair (lines 13-18)

Considering that Ginsberg addresses his own precarious financial situation in “America,” the lamentations of “LA Who am I to Love You,” which see the speaker bemoan her decisions to sell her “life rights for a big check” (line 20) or take “a free ride off a billionaire” (line 61), take on a sarcastic tone. Still, the most striking difference comes with the line, “Fuck the New York Post!” (line 89), which mirrors Ginsberg’s statement, “I’m obsessed by Time Magazine”

(line 40), as it distances the poem further from its original societal critique, pushing it toward an even more self-centered perspective.

An aestheticized re-interpretation divorced from the original, the poem still carries an emotional charge. It also reveals a genuine interest in Ginsberg and a certain understanding of his writing style. If Del Rey is “clearly familiar with an American canon” and “understands that canon” (Crutcher 250), she uses this knowledge as a foundation upon which to build an “extensive persona-driven mythology” (Crutcher 242). By exploiting external references, Del Rey is able to craft her distinctive aesthetic:

Im Fall von Del Rey scheinen Strategien des Zitats und der Oberfläche einerseits sowie authentischer Ausdruck intimer Tiefe andererseits nicht im Widerspruch zu stehen. Vielmehr gewinnt eine auf den ersten Blick scheinbar paradoxe Figur Kontur: Das Zitat wird zum Medium eines authentischen Ausdrucks, wodurch Del Rey ihre Person, Elizabeth Grant, sukzessive mit ihrer Persona Lana Del Rey überschreibt [...]. Das Authentische wird so selbst zur Oberfläche. (Hahn and Röttel 168)

If one applies this idea to her poetry, it seems reasonable to assume that her speaker shapes her poetic identity in a similar fashion. Her pastiche of Allen Ginsberg’s “America” allows her to emphasize hyperbolic, yet authentically felt sentiments, drawing on an external source to amplify the depth of her own poetic expression.

Besides “America,” the first stanzas toy with other well-known references, providing them with a new, similarly ironic twist:

not quite the city that never sleeps
not quite the city that wakes
But the city that dreams for sure
if by dreams you mean nightmares. (lines 5-9)

As she deconstructs the nicknames commonly given to Los Angeles and New York, such as “The City of Dreams” and “The City That Never Sleeps,” turning their bright connotations on their head, the speaker not only establishes a relationship between these cities, but also alludes to her disillusionment with both places. In the audiobook version, which slightly differs from that of the book, Del Rey opens the poem in a different way, saying instead, “I left my city for

San Francisco.” This line could be a nod to classic American song “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” popularized by singers such as Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett. If so, by replacing the word “heart” with “city,” Del Rey generates two paradoxical, yet converging meanings; the speaker has left her heart in Los Angeles, this city being her heart. Far from being vapid, this layering of clichés establishes the central theme of the poem, namely the speaker’s devotion to Los Angeles, despite its cold and hostile temperament towards her.

To capture the alienation that results from this unrequited love, she personifies the city as an awe-inspiring man to whom she feels inferior, as the title already implies. Consumed by her passionate idolization, she accepts his rejection and the ensuing heartache with a manner full of longing, obsessively repeating her being pathetic and undeserving of his love: “I’m pathetic / but so are you / can I come home now?” (lines 28-30). Fearing his abandonment and yearning for his acceptance, the speaker mortifies herself by staying in this place. Although she struggles to call Los Angeles her “home,” she explains that she feels homesick anywhere else. For this reason, she agrees to submit to any demand the city makes, feeling indebted for having already “asked for so much” (line 92). Through maddening repetitions and plaintive sermons, she eventually acknowledges that she is chained to this city:

there’s only one place for me
the city not quite awake
the city not quite asleep
the city that’s something else — something in between (lines 68-71)

A city fraught with nightmares and broken dreams, Los Angeles is “still deciding / how good it should be” (lines 72-73) to her; however, whether it appears at its best or not, the speaker insists that she does not deserve the city either way:

what I do know is that I don’t deserve you
not you at your best, in your splendor with towering
eucalyptus trees that sway in my dominion
Not you at your worst —
Totally on fire, unlivable unbreathable. (lines 96-100)

If she claims that Los Angeles and its trees sway “in [her] dominion” (line 98), it emerges that the city dominates her instead. She even acknowledges (and embraces) this power imbalance

by relating her subordinate position to the violence of its wildfires. Whereas “Bare feet on linoleum” presents scorched-earth places as lands of opportunity, this fourth poem marks a significant departure from such ideas, as it associates the Californian wildfires with a stifling, all-consuming relationship to which the speaker willingly surrenders, even if it prevents her from breathing.

Her claim to be “from nowhere” (line 12) reveals an underlying sense of displacement, which seems to persist into the present, as she still struggles to find a place she can call home—whether in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York, she feels like she “belong[s] to no one” (line 67). She reluctantly admits that she is “a dreamer” (line 11), yet questions her ability to succeed in such a city: “I’m from nowhere who am I to dream” (line 12). In keeping with this dream imagery, she explains that she has trouble sleeping in San Francisco, which, on a symbolic level, implies that this city also fails to meet her expectations. Feeling lonely and increasingly frustrated, she realizes that she has “nowhere else to go” (line 47) but Los Angeles, especially since New York has long ceased being an option:

Also neither one of us can go back to New York.
For you, are unmoving.
As for me, it won’t be my city again until I’m dead
Fuck the New York Post! (line 86-89)

Given that the addressee is Los Angeles personified as a man “vaping lightly” (line 80) in bed, the word “unmoving” seems a pun, as it alludes to this man’s impassive attitude, but also the impossibility of the city to physically move—another equally witty image would be that of this man refusing to leave the speaker’s bed. Her refusal to return to New York unless she dies, a rather strong statement she tops with the line, “Fuck the New York Post!” (line 89), aligns with previous statements made about her troubled experiences in this city, including her alleged institutionalization at the Bellevue hospital.

As she enumerates the reasons why this man should take her back, the speaker realizes that she shares similarities with him (and therefore Los Angeles). Within this one-sided conversation, she interacts with the city as if she were talking to herself, making some of her observations seem like disjointed, diary-like entries:

and I love that you love the neon lights
like me
Orange
in the distance. We both love that and I love that we have
that in common. (lines 81-85)

Her solipsistic musings prompt the impression that the speaker reflects upon herself, as if this love-letter was also self-addressed. As such, it seems destined to evoke the song “Arcadia” (2021), on which Del Rey transforms herself into the city of Los Angeles; her body becomes “a map of LA” (0:06-0:08), her breasts “the Sierra Madre” (0:28-0:31), her hips “every high and byway” (0:33-0:35) of the city, her curves the “San Gabriel” (0:15) Valley, and her lips “the fire [that] licks the bay” (2:19-2:21). Written as a farewell to the city and its iconic landmarks, the song paints the picture of a Los Angeles as seductive as it is oppressive, with the lyrics highlighting the sense of disorientation that comes from pursuing dreams in this place. Through a series of erotically charged images, Del Rey describes her journey to “Arcadia,” referencing both the utopian land of Greek mythology and the Los Angeles County city of the same name. This twofold reference elevates Los Angeles to a legendary, uncharted world; it also intertwines with the idea that “dreamers” view Los Angeles as a place of opportunities, yet find themselves alienated from desiring a city that has no ambition for them. If the song showcases the extent to which Del Rey idealizes this city, she eventually ends her fantasy by acknowledging that she is “not native” (2:09-2:11) and therefore “can’t stay here” (2:06-2:09), making her disappointment with this supposedly utopian world more explicit.

This romanticized portrayal of Los Angeles can be deceptive, much like the metaphors at play in both the song and the poem. Indeed, “Arcadia” also stretches the boundaries of the absurd, as evidenced by the comparisons Del Rey draws between her body and this city: “My hips, every high and byway / That you trace with your fingertips like a Toyota / Run your hands over me like a Land Rover” (0:31-0:46). Whereas earlier images present her in a seductive light, the intrusion of car brands disrupts such impressions. In doing so, Del Rey reveals being vulnerable to exploitation; she becomes a symbol of superficiality and materialism, which are common stereotypes associated with the city of Los Angeles. In this regard, “Arcadia” aligns with the ideas of the poem, insofar as it suggests that finding refuge in idealized worlds is ultimately futile, the most beautiful and promising places also being tainted by imperfections. It is worth noting that whether Del Rey or her narrative voice intent to convey these ideas is beyond the point. Approaching a work from a Camp perspective “demands a

certain kind of willing suspension of disbelief” (Kleinhans 184) with regard to the author’s intentions. Camp relies on “the satisfactory response from its audience” (Long 55). Accordingly, the mere fact that the poem and the song convey these impressions is sufficient to validate them.

The subsequent stanzas reveal that the narrative voice struggles with a profound sense of disillusionment, as she realizes that she is both motherless and daughterless:

Daughter to no one
table for one
party of thousands of people I don’t know at Delilah [...]

Can I come home now?
Mother to no one
private jet for one (lines 31-33; 37-39)

This sequence of stanzas crafts a poignant contrast, as it juxtaposes the speaker’s longing for a meaningful presence in her life, whether that be a mother or a child, with her current reality as a lonesome woman. Whether she attends the city’s lavish parties or takes a private jet, she struggles with a nagging sense of loneliness. Having grown up without affection, she implores the city to compensate for this troubled upbringing by making her a mother: “I never had a mother / will you let me make the sun my own now / and the ocean my son” (lines 49-51). She then asks Los Angeles to make its mountains her daughters, promising to “teach them about fires warn them about water” (line 55). The connection to “Bare feet on linoleum,” in which she alludes to a strained relationship with her mother, is unmistakable. The parallels between these poems become even more pronounced as the stanzas unfold, with the speaker returning to her water imagery to express her feeling motherless:

You see — you have a mother
A continental shelf
a larger piece of land from where you came

And I am an orphan
a little seashell that rests upon your native shores (lines 102-106)

From a solitary woman sitting alone in a private jet, the speaker transforms into a distraught orphan, desperately begging for the city’s attention—an impression Del Rey reinforces in the audio-recording of her poem, in which she audibly pants through some of her lines, adopting a nearly out-of-breath, childlike voice.

This transformation continues as the poem takes yet another disturbing turn, evolving into a medley of Freudian statements, the already unsettling relationship the speaker has with Los Angeles coming dangerously close to incest and pedophilia:

Make it real life, let me be a real wife to you.
Girlfriend, lover, mother, friend.
I adore you [...]
I’ll promise you’ll barely even notice me
unless you want to notice me
unless you prefer a rambunctious child
in which case I can turn it on too! (lines 113-115; 120-122)

Most troubling is her ending the poem with the line, “sincerely your daughter” (line 130). By adopting the roles of mother, daughter, and girlfriend concurrently, the speaker perpetuates the absurdity she has built throughout the poem. An orphan and a devoted groupie, she captures “the paradox of attempting to seek liberation through ultimately enslaving obsession” (Walters). She subjects herself entirely to the city, willing to become whatever it wants, even at the cost of losing herself: “I’m yours if you’ll have me / quietly or loudly” (lines 128-129). The grainy, highly pixelated photograph that follows this poem, which shows the Paramount Studios water tower from a distance, resonates with such ideas, themselves reminiscent of Del Rey’s tendency “to loving that which is just out of reach” (Bernstein) and “romanticiz[ing] destructive forces that fortunately cannot last” (Walters). In this specific image, access to the movie studios is made impossible by a prominent hedge, making the tower seem even more remote. In this regard, the image and the poem illustrate the way “Del Rey delights in painting the image of the tragic girl, the sort who is run-down and destroyed—whether by Hollywood or by a man” (Rivieccio).

2.5. The Land of 1000 fires

Before the collection delivers its next, full-length poem, “The Land of 1000 fires,” one is confronted with a few paratextual elements, including a reproduction of a linen-textured, yellowed paper sheet, on which a single tercet has been typed: “i measure the time by the days i’ve spent away from you / that though occurred to me / as i watched the sky go dark from blue” (lines 1-3). Noteworthy is the final word of this haiku-like poem, which is handwritten in blue crayon. As the pages progress, the speaker gains assurance in her writing abilities, which propels her to explore and play with various mediums of expression. This blue, hand-penciled word, which imitates a child’s handwriting, suggests her adopting a more playful approach to poetry, which should recall the essence of the first poem. These paratextual intrusions also help suggest that writing helps her regain control over her paralysis:

Even though the process of writing is not mentioned explicitly, the actual use of handwriting can be seen as manifestation of the strong connection between writing and influencing one’s own life. (Tauer 9)

As a poetry collection, *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass* is continually interrupted by similarly brief, untitled poems, which are themselves accompanied by original photographs taken by Del Rey and other black-and-white, archival images. All these elements suggest that the speaker sees her poetry at the intersection of writing and visual design. This unique fusion of media also creates a sense of disruption, as she sporadically interrupts her reading experience with visual artworks, thereby placing her poems in an atmosphere of instability—a feeling heightened by the absence of pagination. One could interpret these intrusions as a symbolic representation of her feelings of doubt; they compel readers to linger on the pages, mirroring her own experience with paralysis. This first intrusion lends support to this interpretation, as it describes how she measures time in relation to another person, implying that she has not yet achieved her desired degree of independence.

The fact that “blue” is the only word written by hand holds significance, as Del Rey is largely known for her fascination with this color. While she frequently makes references to colors in her lyrics, whether in a figurative or literal sense, blue remains the one she cites the most, to the point of making it an integral part of her aesthetic. Whether she uses it to describe the drug-hazed frenzy of getting “wild and fuckin’ crazy like the color blue” (1:18-1:23) on “Nectar of the Gods” (2021), the depressive languor of seeing everything “so dark blue” (2:20-2:23) on “Black Beauty” (2014), the cold-hearted attitudes of a boyfriend living “in

shades of blue” (0:23-0:25) on “Shades of Cool” (2014), or the beauty of flames “so hot that they turn blue” (0:06-0:10) on “Freak” (2015), Del Rey uses the color to express a wide range of emotions. The closest similarity with the three-line poem, however, comes with the song “Get Free,” previously mentioned for its redacted words: “I wanna move / Out of the Black / Into the blue” (3:45-3:58). When asked about her reasoning for the lyrics, she replied:

Well, in my head, the black was negative thinking, and the blue was a bit of a retreat into nature. So visually, I was thinking the ocean, but also just the connotation of the words: I think of the sky, like a new horizon, something fresher. (World Café 33:33–33:57)

The placement of the poem is in keeping with this statement; her narrative voice, who is at a pivotal moment of her journey from doubt to self-assurance, similarly expresses her desire to transcend negative thinking and progress towards new horizons. The visual counterpart to the tercet is a photograph of a suburban neighborhood taken on a blue-sky day, with a satellite tower rising amidst electrical wires and middle-class homes. If the bright blue sky suggests the speaker’s growing optimism, the subsequent image somewhat thwarts this impression. It depicts a similar landscape, a road junction flanked by electric pylons, red traffic lights, and urban warehouses, but it is this time taken at night, with the sky being visibly darker. As such, the images progressively darken, the sky turning blue to black—a paradox that, if one adopts a Camp reading and considers this inconsistency as deliberate, suggests that the speaker is not yet through with her troubled past.

The use of the color blue is all the more meaningful as it forms a recurring motif in the subsequent poem, “The Land of 1000 fires,” in which the speaker devotes an almost obsessive attention to the “cool blue steel eyes” (line 2) of her romantic partner. This fifteen-stanza-long poem resumes her search for freedom in scorched-earth places, which now takes the direction of Vernon, a small industrial city in the southeastern part of Los Angeles County, where “the air is fried and on fire” (line 20). The poem also maintains her conflation of person and place, as she explains yearning for a place that “feels like a person” (line 24). This causes her to merge her boyfriend, the city of Vernon, and American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan into one singular entity, addressing them collectively using the second-person pronoun “you.”

The speaker initiates this merging in the very first lines, drawing attention to the blue eyes of her partner, which share the same shade as those of Bob Dylan:

Two blue steel trains run through the tunnels of your
cool blue steel eyes
Vernon
Rock quarry
The vastness of which has nothing on my beautiful mind
Dylan
I hear Dylan when I look at you (lines 1-7)

If her comparing eyes to trains might seem like an unusual metaphor, it helps suggest that the speaker travels to Vernon by train. The three photographs that follow the poem are consistent with this interpretation, since they present different viewpoints of the Vernon water tower and its adjacent industrial site, coincidentally located near the railway station of the city. This first stanza also establishes a connection between “Vernon” and “Dylan,” their singularization as one-word liners placing them on the same symbolic level. Besides, she instantly thinks of Bob Dylan when she looks at her boyfriend, which further emphasizes the interchangeability of these referents in her mind. The subsequent lines offer a more detailed description of this partner and the nature of their relationship:

The yin to my yang
the toughness to my unending softness
A striking example of masculinity
firm in your verticality
sure in your confrontation against all elements (lines 9-13)

An onslaught of clichés, this stanza illustrates how Camp favors “the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms” (Sontag 519). The speaker contrasts her own femininity against the sensationalized virility of her boyfriend, delivering a binary, yet complementary representation she readily embraces. As a “striking example of masculinity” (line 11), this man stands out for his ability to remain “firm in [his] verticality” (line 12), a sexual innuendo that borders on the ironic. She defines herself strictly in relation to this man, which only underlines her submissive status: “The sun to my wilting daisy / the earth to the wildflower that doesn’t care where it grows” (lines 15-16). While it might be tempting to rally behind Del Rey’s fiercest detractors and label her work as “disempowering” or “anti-feminist,” it should be noted that, in accordance with Camp, her aesthetic “has no political ideology or

moral purpose” (Tavana). While she indeed fetishizes the “iconography that the intersectional feminist wants to dismantle,” it is not so much to deconstruct “the bricolage that makes up her aesthetic; instead, she follows it guiltlessly” (Tavana). Del Rey does not attempt “to reclaim or subvert sexist clichés, but to perform powerlessness,” which, from a Camp perspective, is “both unsettling and exciting” (Molotkow). And yet, the imagery of the poem seems so simplistic that it warrants further examination; it facilitates “a Camp reading because it invites scornful laughter due to its ineptness” (Kleinhans 186). Approaching the poem as such allows one to posit “a stance, detached, calm, and free, from which the opposition [between the trivial and the serious] as a whole and its attendant terms can be perceived and judged” (Long 54). This reliance on gender stereotypes practically begs to be read with ironic distance; if one considers it to be deliberate, it might represent yet another attempt by the speaker to conceal an underlying issue.

Ambiguities arise when these clichés are cross-analyzed. The reference to the “yin and yang” (line 9), which in Chinese philosophy describes two complementary principles, suggests that this man perfectly completes her. The equilibrium between these two principles is essential to maintain harmony; however, her subsequent references disrupt this symmetry, revealing that the relationship is not as balanced as it seems. The narrative voice portrays this man as an overpowering sun that deteriorates her daisy to the point of “wilting” (line 15), which contradicts the idea that this man is right for her. Likewise, her identification with a “wildflower that doesn’t care where it grows” (line 16) harks back to the imagery of the first poem, in which wildflowers stand as symbols of freedom, thus implying her desire to live without letting this man constrain her being. She even claims to have never fallen in love in the subsequent stanza, comparing her relationship to the fire-polluted air of Vernon:

everything’s burnt here
there’s no escaping it
the air is fried and on fire
I’ve never really fallen in love (lines 18-21)

The speaker appears more interested in the opportunities offered by the city of Vernon than those by her relationship. While it might not be “love” (line 21), the feeling she experiences in this place is akin to that of being at home—a feeling of comfort she admits to not feeling in the presence of her boyfriend:

but whatever this feeling is
i wish everyone could experience it
this place feels like a person
familiar
like someone i've stood next to before
But never while I was standing next to you (lines 22-27)

For all that, she seems to appreciate his presence, ending the stanza by thanking him “for being here” (line 29) and “bearing witness to [her] vastness” (line 30).

If the speaker is dissatisfied with her relationship, it might be because her boyfriend reminds her of her own past:

Through the years I've called you in and out of my orbit
You, in your madness
the satellite that's constellating my World
mimicking the inner chaos that i've disowned
a mirror to my past life retribution
a reflection of my sadness (lines 31-36)

Turning to cosmic imagery, she portrays what appears to be an on-and-off relationship. She transforms her partner into a satellite locked in orbit around her, while she assumes the role of a gigantic celestial body. These images contrast dramatically with the preceding lines; they not only see her drifting away into abstractions, but also reverse her previous depictions of submission. In this scenario, it is she who, through her irresistible gravitational pull, brings this man back to her. Her claim to have disowned “the inner chaos” (line 24) of this man suggests another shift in power dynamics, implying that she expelled him from her orbit. Although the speaker seems to understand the detrimental effects of such a relationship, her boyfriend dangerously mirroring her “sadness” (line 35) and “past life retribution” (line 35), she insists that he remains essential to her survival:

If I'm going to keep on living the way that i'm living
i can't do it without you.
My feet aren't on the ground
i need your body to stand on
your name to define me
on top of being a woman
i am scared
and
ethereal (lines 37-45)

Sinking deeper into gender stereotypes, the narrative voice surrenders herself (once again) to her partner, without whom she claims she would have neither body nor name. As mentioned earlier, the placement of "The Land of 1000 fires" holds particular significance. It finds the speaker in a liminal state, suspended between the dark and blue skies of the paratexts. This precarious situation results in shifts fraught with ambiguity, placing her at the crossroads of seemingly irreconcilable poles; she becomes at once the deceitful femme fatale, luring her victim in and out of her orbit, and the archetypal damsel in distress, willing to give up her name for that of her savior.

These ambiguities are reminiscent of those in the music video for Del Rey's song "Love" (2017), whose anachronistic blend of spatial aesthetics and sixties-related iconography inspires hope as much as melancholy. Beneath the "sugary imagery of couples sharing walks and drives together" lies a deep sense of unease; the love celebrated by Del Rey throughout the video "isn't a simple longing for a lost object, the loved one who slipped from our grasp; it's a kind of depression, the Freudian melancholia that lacks an identifiable source" (Sledmere). The song suggests "the start of something new," yet its music video "is grounded in retro culture" (Sledmere). It finds Del Rey singing in "the timeless space of an auditorium," a space of "absence and aporetic timelessness where anything might happen" (Sledmere). Likewise, the speaker invites readers to embrace the same "temporal infinitude, the possibility of abyss offered by sudden expansions of space-time, the spreading out into the galaxy" (Sledmere) that her cosmic imagery creates. If she finds herself "stranded in the interval between what exists and future artistic possibility" (Sledmere), this standstill suggests an impending shift. Her return to cosmic imagery in the subsequent stanza, this time to highlight her creativity, the "seven worlds in [her] eyes" (line 47), serves as a testament to these ideas:

one to draw my words from and my muses
another one i try and harness late at night that lies somewhere
off of the right of Jupiter
and then of course there's this one i live in
the land of 1,000 fires
that's where you come in (lines 49-54)

By introducing the idea of muses and creative worlds, she hints at her writing process, which sets the stage for future metafictional interpretations, as it implies her awareness regarding her role in shaping the poems.

The speaker continues to explore such ideas in the final stanzas, as she elaborates on her creative process and emphasizes her ability to shape worlds through the power of writing: “i thrive because i say i do / and because it's what i write” (lines 78-79). The lines imply that her so-called thriving is only the product of her writing, poetry helping her manifest the future she desires. By claiming that she can “thrive” simply by writing it down, she constructs a fantasized world that “guid[es] [her] far from the world of [her] early days” (line 61). Instead of guiding her “toward high sea cliffs” (line 63), it leads her “toward a future place” (line 65), where she can be “who [she] would have been / if everything had turned out alright” (lines 74-75). In this regard, it is not so much that the speaker relies on her boyfriend to survive, but rather that poetry is essential to her happiness:

But honestly, if you weren't here with me
i don't know what things would look like

That's my why no matter what world i'm in
i navigate by satellite (lines 80-83)

Through poetry, she discovers a sense of independence, enabling her to navigate hardships more effectively. If the poem aligns with the way Del Rey challenges “a retro time warp, by reviving and inhabiting the languorously passive models of pre-second-wave femininity” (Shaviro 50), it also reveals a deeper yearning for empowerment and self-realization. Throughout the poem, her narrative voice oscillates between moments of strength and weakness, simultaneously conforming to and exaggerating gender roles. If she initially seeks stability through a man, she

also derives strength from her writing. To this extent, the poem highlights the significance of poetry in her life, suggesting that it plays an essential role in shaping her cosmic-like identity.

2.6. Never to Heaven

As the speaker grows confident in her poetic abilities, she gradually sheds her sense of doubt, as evidenced by the subsequent poem, “Never to Heaven,” whose preliminary version appears alongside its final, slightly updated form. This draft includes a few handwritten notes by Del Rey herself, including two crossed-out lines, “too nervous to share my innermost thoughts / with you,” which are absent from the official poem. By making these lines visible, without removing them entirely from the collection, the speaker not only reaffirms her desire to share her personal secrets, but also reveals the hesitations that arise during her creative process—she no longer tries to suppress her uncertainties, but rather chooses to embrace them.

By any means, the inclusion of this unpolished draft proves to be a metafictional device, since it inevitably foregrounds the writing process of Del Rey. The “aggressively de-skilled, do-it-yourself” (Fetveit 188) visual of the poem echoes much of her aesthetic, in which “weakness is counterfeited—that is, deliberately produced—and where the medium itself appears to lisp and to totter in its precarious mediation” (Fetveit 198). It reveals a certain capacity for organization, since these pseudo-imperfections are voluntarily retained within the collection. If they are meant to produce “a sense of being cool, of not trying too hard, not caring too much—an attitude Del Rey often epitomizes” (Fetveit 199), they also indicate that the poem is orchestrated. To this extent, this deceptively amateurish style is as an essential component of the work, which ties in with the way Camp “pushes a poorly done form (poorly done by conventional standards of technique and social manners) to the limits so that its very badness is what the work is about” (Kleinhans 189). While the “forms of imperfection employed by Del Rey [...] tend to be highly perfected” (Fetveit 200), they ensure “a fallible yet lively quality” (Fetveit 199) to her work, in the sense that they “help strip the performer bare and produce a sense of intimacy” (Fetveit 200). Confronted with the various revisions the poem has undergone, giving it the appearance of a work in progress, readers are therefore encouraged to interact with the collection in a more active way.

It is not only the visual aspect of the poem that allows such ideas to be asserted, for its thematic content also aligns with this perspective. Throughout the poem, the speaker uses the skyline as a metaphor for her new, yet precarious state of mind, explaining that she wants her eyes to “stay level to the horizon” (line 1) and never “as high as heaven” (line 2). She believes that seeking answers in the sky, where “angels fear to tread” (line 4), would only lead her to

disappointment. As a result, she focuses on the present moment, “the magic of nowness — the solution to most / questions” (lines 7-8). She proudly states that her newfound comfort stems from herself, rather than from the person she addresses throughout the poem, a man named “Joe” (line 27). During this moment of introspection, she realizes that the “whys in this lifetime [...] are inconsequential” (line 6), implying that there are no straightforward answers to her concerns, which prompts her to accept doubts as an inherent part of her journey—a shift emblematic of her personal growth.

Her delivery also seems more genuine, as she leaves aside the dramatic tendencies of her previous works. The tone thus takes on a softer, more conversational quality:

there are no reasons.
and if there are — i'm wrong
but at least i won't have spent my life waiting
looking for God in the clouds of the dawn
or listening out for otherworldly contact
30 billion light years on
No. i'll let the others do the pondering
while i'll be sitting on the lawn
reading something unsubstantial
with the television on (lines 9-18)

Rather than overanalyzing her life choices, as in “Bare feet on linoleum,” she now lets “others do the pondering” (line 15) and revels in mundane pursuits, this time even finding solace in them—her lounging on the lawn somewhat echoes the nonchalance of Violet in the garden. As in “The Land of 1000 fires,” she turns to cosmic imagery to convey her longing for freedom, expressing her intention to no longer spend time anticipating an “otherworldly contact / 30 billion light years on” (lines 13-14). But, more importantly, she writes her lines using the future tense, as if trying to manifest her future through poetry. This framework is already indicated in the first lines of the poem, whose subjunctive mood and biblical undertones align with such ambitions:

May my eyes always stay level to the horizon
may they never gaze as high as heaven
to ask why
May I never go where angels fear to tread
so as to have to ask for answers in the sky (lines 1-5)

The fourth line might be a reference to E. M. Forster's novel "Where Angels Fear to Tread" (1905), whose title derives from Alexander Pope's work "An Essay on Criticism" (1711). While the novel's overarching themes of redemption and salvation could vaguely be applied to the speaker's situation, Pope's poem fits surprisingly well into this context, as it discusses the roles of critics and writers. Pope enumerates various mistakes poets make when writing, such as settling for easy rhymes or clichéd metaphors, which he argues can be avoided by understanding one's limitations. The poem also urges critics to consider all the elements that make up a piece of work, concluding that poorly written criticisms cause greater harm to poetry than poorly written poems. Rather than seeking answers from an external authority, such as a "God in the clouds" (line 12), the speaker relies on her personal perspective, asserting authority over her poetic abilities. At the same time, she also exhibits a degree of self-awareness, acknowledging the possibility of being wrong: "there are no reasons. / and if there are – i'm wrong" (lines 9-10). These shifts between confidence and humility likely reflect the ongoing transformations she undergoes as she matures into a poet.

In keeping with this burgeoning self-esteem, her declarations of love become distinctly less metaphorical, the speaker now celebrating the worldly simplicity of waking up early to "make [Joe] a pot of coffee" (line 20) or enjoying a meal at a seaside restaurant:

That's what i was thinking this morning Joe
that it's times like this as the marine layer lifts
off the sea from the view of our favorite restaurant
that i pray that i may
always keep my eyes level to your eyeline
never downcast at the tablecloth (lines 21-26)

The lines suggest her desire for an equal and balanced relationship, a marked departure from the themes explored so far in the collection. By meeting Joe's gaze without lowering her eyes to the tablecloth, she claims equality with this man and thus rejects the more submissive roles

she occupies in earlier poems. In this context, the word “tablecloth” (line 26) is significant, since it conjures up images of domesticity, echoing the stereotypically feminine role she now wants to transcend. Besides, it is the first time in the collection where the speaker explicitly names the person she addresses—she mentions Los Angeles, Vernon, or Dylan in previous poems, but predominantly uses the second-person pronoun “you” in reference to her partners.

Although she appears to have learned from her past experiences and looks forward to embracing a stable, anxiety-free future, she still acknowledges the possibility of a relapse. It is not surprising that this fear arises as she observes “the coast of Long Beach” (line 36), given that water has been associated with strong feelings of doubt in previous works:

it's times like this as the marine layer lifts
off the sea on the dock with the candle lit
that i think to myself
there are things you still don't know about me
like sometimes i'm afraid my sadness is too big
and that one day you might have to help me handle it (lines 27-32)

Despite her newly restored confidence, she dreads needing help to manage her emotions. Her admitting this fear, which relates to her desire to share her innermost thoughts, marks an important step towards forging a deeper relationship with her audience. The fact that Joe is yet to know about her sadness, as she first reveals this situation to readers, implies that she finds in poetry a more effective form of support, allowing her to express herself in a way she cannot with him. This idea takes shape in the final lines, as she explains that she does need someone else to find purpose in life:

Because i have faith in a man as strange as that seems
in times like these
and it's not just because of the warmth i've found in you
brown eyes
but because i believe in the goodness in me (lines 38-42)

While acknowledging the warmth that this man has brought to her, she also highlights her own qualities, which have empowered her “to build a new life” (line 46). By writing that her goodness is “firm enough to plant a flag in / or a / rosebud” (lines 43-45), she reinforces the

theme of self-sufficiency that runs throughout the poem. A reversal of gender dynamics also emerges in this final stanza, as she contrasts the masculinity of her partner, described as someone “firm in [his] verticality” (line 12) in the last poem, with her own goodness, which she portrays as equally strong. By adding a “rosebud” (line 45), a quintessentially feminine symbol, she further solidifies her image as a delicate, yet self-reliant woman.

2.7. Tessa DiPietro

Having acknowledged that her sadness is too big, the speaker resolves to consult “a healer on 6th Street and Ridgely” (line 2) in the following poem, presumably in an attempt to forestall potential issues. Written in the same vein as previous works, the eight-stanza-long poem “Tessa DiPietro” continues her quest for insightful revelations, the speaker now seeking ways to overcome her insecurities, which the medium diagnoses as stemming from an “untrusting” (line 5) energy field. Upon hearing that nothing can be done about the matter, she bursts into tears, claiming that there is “never anything you can do about the important / things” (lines 9-10), seemingly rejecting her initial guiding principle of passive resignation.

Another meditative, first-person realization formatted as a poem, “Tessa DiPietro” adds nothing fundamentally new to the content of the collection, though it helps re-emphasize the importance of poetry in helping the speaker gain confidence. If anything, her account of this vulnerable moment is consistent with her commitment to sharing personal stories. In doing so, she revisits previous ideas, as in the very first stanza, in which she explains that whoever touched her did so with violent intent:

No one ever touched me without wanting to kill me
except for a healer on 6th Street in Ridgely

Tessa DiPietro recommended casually
by a medium i no longer know (lines 1-4)

While her recourse to unconventional healing methods might seem preposterous at first, it still proves effective. Just as poetry helps her overcome traumas, Tessa DiPietro, the only person able to touch the speaker without causing her pain, emerges as a figure in whom she can find comfort. Besides, the opening line reinforces the idea that her previous exaggerated displays of love concealed dissatisfaction, as it reveals that all her romantic partners, including those mentioned so far in the collection, have hurt her in one way or another.

If the poem follows in the footsteps of its predecessors, it also stands as a testament to the changes the speaker has undergone since “Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass,” as she now deconstructs the ideology behind her previous state of mind. Whereas Violet first awakened a latent desire for freedom, the youthful nonchalance of this child striking the speaker as a remedy to find inner peace, her attitude now becomes associated with an irremediable diagnosis that sends her into uncontrollable sobbing:

She said my number one problem was my field was untrusting
when asked what to do she paused and said
nothing
which sent me right into uncontrollable sobbing
because there’s never anything you can do about the important
things (lines 5-10)

The ambiguity that results from the line “there’s never anything you can do” (line 9) should remind readers of the oxymoronic mantra from the eponymous poem, “i decided to do nothing about everything / forever” (lines 20-21), whose initial appeal soon turned counter-productive, with the speaker wrongfully sailing beyond self-affirmation and into paralysis. Since her efforts for self-actualization have so far been relatively unsuccessful, it makes sense for her to have an “untrusting” field, the implication being that she still lacks confidence. Bearing in mind her goal of becoming a poet, she seeks ways to break through this situation, turning to the advice of her medium for help:

She said
Ok, one thing you can do is
picture the floor rising up to support you
and sink into the back of the bed that’s behind you
too much of your energy is in front of and above you (lines 11-15)

Her newfound confidence seems to manifest itself in her use of less sophisticated language; forgoing her previously long-winded, alliterative-rich lines and overblown statements, the speaker opts for a lawless, more conversational poetic style.

The picture featured alongside the poem, which happens to be the first archival black-and-white photograph of the collection, portrays a schoolgirl gazing down at a diary-like

textbook. By introducing this specific picture, Del Rey inevitably moves readers to recognize themselves in the image. Indeed, the resemblance between the book that the schoolgirl reads and the one her narrative voice writes—that is, *Violet Bent Backward Over the Grass*, the poetry book that readers have in their hands—seems to be a metafictional device. Besides deepening the relationship with her audience, the photograph also invites a reexamination of the eponymous poem, which she parallels to this anonymous, stand-in Violet character. Far from the untamed, wild temper the seven-year-old girl evokes in the first poem, this representation of childhood here suggests pure, unadulterated artistic sensibilities—the two-page photograph that follows the poem, which pictures a sun-brushed garden, an ideal playground for headstands and backbends, maintains the reference to Violet.

As the speaker gains confidence, she starts exploring new artistic territories and dares to take risks with her writing, such as incorporating self-referential humor into her poetry. Indeed, the title of the poem references a real-life psychic Del Rey is known to admire. In true Camp fashion, Del Rey subverts the solemn tone of her poem to make an absurd, yet accurate comment about her public image. As such, the poem gently mocks the speaker’s tendency to draw lessons from Jim Morrison, a figure Del Rey notoriously idolizes. While the reference has an undeniably ironic quality, it remains uncertain whether Del Rey is entirely aware of the comedic effect it generates. When the medium instructs her narrative voice to imagine herself sinking into a bed, she recalls a video recording of the Doors instead:

Which for some reason made me think of a live show i had seen
Jim Morrison at the Hollywood Bowl
1968? (check date)
the blue trellised lights gave him an unusual aura
like a halo or something – made him 8 feet or taller
i remember just thinking he looked out of his body
but definitely like a God on stage (lines 16-22)

It must be noted that alongside these New Age references to Morrison and his otherworldly, blue-lit aura is the schoolgirl reading a book. Together with the speaker’s unassuming memo reminding herself to double-check the date of the concert, these elements leave an unsettling impression. If the speaker lends a transcendental quality to the Doors’ performance, leading her to believe that “an artist has to function a little bit above themselves / if they really want to

transmit some heaven” (lines 24-25), the medium eventually thwarts this fanatical, soul-searching meditation, advising her to turn inward to find answers instead:

Then she told me
Singleness of focus is the key to transmission
for an emphasis on developing inner intuition
close your eyes and feel where you hold your attention
if it's in the back of your eyes walk it down to your heart
center
and make that the new place from which your thoughts enter (lines 26-32)

That the poem evolves into slightly incoherent, psychedelic ramblings, akin to the drug-fueled poems of Morrison himself, is all the funnier as the DiPietro proceeds to dismiss the singer and his legacy, urging the speaker to “find another frame of reference” (line 34) when making important decisions, cynically noting that Morrison died aged twenty-seven and made no sense:

Oh – and Jim died at 27
so find another frame of reference when you're referencing
heaven
And did you ever read the lyrics to 'People Are Strange'?
He made no sense. (lines 34-38)

To wonder why the speaker identifies with Morrison, Plath, or Winehouse, whom she morbidly lumps together as 27-Club inductees, is as close as she comes to an answer, leaving readers with nothing but a lingering sense of wistfulness as they reach the poem's conclusion. If “Tessa DiPietro” marks a departure from her noncommittal, apathetic approach to life, the poem is most interesting for it prompts a critical reevaluation of Del Rey's external references. With intermittent references to Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, Sylvia Plath, and Jim Morrison, Del Rey fashions a multi-layered, yet surface-level, aesthetic; in most instances, these invocations have little to do with the actual work of these artists, as they are mainly used with regard to the significance they hold in popular culture. If Del Rey introduces “an iconography saturated with Americana, well-worn tokens of nostalgia” (Fetveit 195), she primarily uses them for their affective drive. She “celebrat[es] cultural exhaustion through affective emptiness” (Siddiqi 4), exploring her references in a way that ultimately contradicts their value, yet not strategically or

even deliberately: “It’s an obfuscation that isn’t facilitated through irony; it’s facilitated through a recent past that foreclosed on the promise of American symbols and reemphasized the primacy of images” (Siddiqi 4). When she has her medium say that Jim Morrison makes no sense, it is not so much an attempt to question “the flaws and inadequacies in the retrotyping upon which much nostalgia tends to be based” (Fetveit 203) as a mere nod to herself, a wink to readers from across the page. Much of this relates to the way Camp operates; it infiltrates “popular culture posing as valueless,” thereby “presenting a parodic challenge to [its] presumed norms” (Jarman-Ivens 193). Del Rey neither attempts nor aspires to conduct a thorough examination of her references; they function as interchangeable units waiting to be exploited. This approach most likely contributes to creating her distinctive aesthetic, as these references invariably circle back to her:

Lana’s references are not footnotes: either in their rigour or the secondary placement. They are central, but gauzy; less quotations than invocations, sketches of shadows, implications of outlines. They always point back to her, her interests, her consumption. (Morrison and Sledmere)

Ultimately, her references “are less important than her relationship to them” (Molotkow). To this extent, they are not meant to be dissected, but rather experienced viscerally, as elements that create a purely aesthetic-driven experience.

2.8. Past the bushes Cypress thriving

After gaining insights from her medium, the narrative voice delves into deeper introspection in the seventeen-stanza-long poem “Past the bushes Cypress thriving,” reflecting on her poetic identity and how it has evolved so far in the collection. With clear allusions to her previous hardships and her subsequent, unsuccessful attempts to distract herself from these, she explores her ongoing battle with self-doubt, comparing her situation as a poet to that of a painter—unsure of what to paint, she is yet to be inspired “with a vision” (line 9). Moments of uncertainty are interspersed with bursts of self-assurance, the speaker oscillating between clarity and flippant, though disconcerting contemplations. A distinct duality thus emerges throughout the poem, which reaches a climax in the final couplet. Torn between her past self-destructive tendencies and her precarious situation, she concludes that she does not “want to be forgotten” (line 59), yet “want[s] to disappear” (line 60).

As such, the poem is one of self-examination; it finds her contemplating herself in a mirror, addressing her reflection in the second person:

I saw you in the mirror
you were wearing your hair differently
carrying the air differently
You say you want your hair long parted in the middle
Long in solidarity – worn for all his women

Long Beach

Aimless (lines 1-7)

If the opening line makes it clear that the speaker addresses herself, her aimlessly wandering around Long Beach, a coastal town previously mentioned in “Never to Heaven,” posits this intimate moment as a continuation of the sixth poem, in which she prudently acknowledges the depth of her sadness. Additionally, her emphasizing the way she has altered her demeanor, much like her thoughts and voice changed in “What happened when I left you,” suggests that she intends to address an earlier, more anxious version of herself. By interacting with her own reflection and subtly alluding to her previous works, she initiates a dialogue between past and present, contemplating how both her artistic and personal identities once felt adrift. To convey such feelings, she goes on to describe herself as a painter waiting to be struck by inspiration: “your fingers wiping oil on the paper w precision / w decision like an artist never seen with a vision” (lines 8-9). Like an artist faced with a blank canvas, the speaker portrays herself at a standstill—her fingers merely skim the paper, wiping the oil as she gathers the courage to make a decision. Doubting what she should paint, she gazes absent-mindedly at the ceiling with a focused, laser-like precision:

Stared w venom at the ceiling
not the grass
but straight ahead
Just at the skyline
w precision
laser vision (lines 11-16)

Whereas keeping her eyes leveled at the skyline carries optimistic connotations in “Never to Heaven,” it conveys a sense of frustration in this instance. By drawing a parallel between the ceiling and the skyline, the speaker captures the paradox at the heart of her work; she longs to embrace the creative expression that lies beyond her self-inflicted restrictions. Just as she misinterprets the composure of Violet in the first poem, mistaking her nonchalance for cold indifference, she now sidesteps the production of her painting. In doing so, she is left with nothing to do but vacantly stare straight ahead, which prevents her from seeing “the grass” (lines 12). The ceiling thus seems a metaphor for the boundaries within which the speaker feels confined, hindering her from exploring her full potential.

As one might expect, the following stanzas see her bemoaning her inability to move forward, so that the poem, much like her painting, makes little progress:

time was stopping
moving through u.
U dictated
by what moved u

only moving never thinking. (line 17-21)

While her claim to never spend time needlessly thinking appears disingenuous, it echoes her past inability to make decisions. Unable to set her mind on the right path, she pictures herself frozen in time; worse still, time moves through her. Reveling in her self-mythologizing drag, she introduces seemingly disparate symbols into her rant, arguing that her situation is “[l]ike a phoenix like a chemtrail like a wavelength” (line 25), elements she believes resemble “the sun that’s slowly sinking / at the height of afternoon / in the heat of summer evening” (lines 22-24). She returns to her painting imagery by invoking American painter Georgia O’Keeffe in the subsequent stanza, chiefly known for her paintings of exotic flowers suggestive of female genitalia:

Georgia O’Keeffe
Georgia peaches
Doing nothing but your painting
For forever (lines 27-30)

The reference somewhat binds her to the renowned artist, hinting at her desire to find a similar artistic vision and therefore overcome her creative block. This reference also triggers an unexpected associative leap, as the speaker haphazardly associates the painter with the state of Georgia, known as the “Peach State,” thereby echoing Del Rey’s ability to make “references to symbols of suburbia and Americana become wistful and lust-worthy” (Bess 8). The mention of O’Keeffe in this poem seems almost a setup for her to reference the state of Georgia; her introducing the often-nicknamed “mother of American modernism” only to follow it up with a play-on-word such as “Georgia peaches” represents a departure from meaning that is inherently Camp. This process of re-imagining symbols of Americana is perhaps one of the defining features of Del Rey’s aesthetic—her ability “to look onto the suburban, become a temporary native of it, and then drive away, off to the next sunset” (Bess 9).

Whereas the poem “What happened when I left you” feels contrived, the subsequent stanzas emerge as its revised version, the one the speaker could have written had she been faithful to her commitment to sharing secrets from the very start, as she now conveys her happiness in significantly less flowery terms:

love is rising
No resisting
cheeks are flushing
Now you’re living

Say goodbye now
no resisting
Live you’re life like
no one’s listening (lines 33-40)

As the stanzas unfold, the speaker appears increasingly confident, with her writing poetry as if “no one’s listening” (line 40), an ironic statement in itself, since people can actually listen to her poems via the spoken-word album. In this regard, Del Rey’s audio-recording of this poem flows rather smoothly, which is due to her repeated use of verbs in gerund, strategically placed at the end of short, punctuation-free lines. This writing technique prevents readers from interrupting their reading, with the poem thus capturing what “life is breathing” (line 41) and what “the world is living” (line 42).

As she describes the sensations associated with falling in love, such as the heightened feeling of being alive or the warmth flushing her cheeks, the narrative voice simultaneously expresses affection for her poetry, with her poem taking on the form of a self-addressed letter, a peace offering to her turbulent past:

at the end of Lime and 10th street down the road that's green
and winding

Past the bushes cypress thriving past the chain
link fence

and driving

farther down the road less traveled

there u are athleisure wear unraveled

Now I see you clear (lines 48-55)

Venturing further along a verdant path and past a chain-link fence, symbolic of the barrier previously holding her back, she reaches a point in her journey where she confronts herself. It is a moment of profound realization, as suggested by the line “there u are” (line 54), with the speaker seeing herself clearly for the first time. She realizes that she finds her most authentic self when she sheds her layers off, unraveling her athleisure wear “farther down the road less traveled” (line 53), a reference to Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” (1916). Whereas Frost does not infer that “the road less traveled” is inherently better, for his poem primarily explores the complexities and consequences of decision-making, Del Rey subverts this interpretative potential, reducing his emblematic road to a winding path at the intersection of two unremarkable street corners—the shorthand is too obvious, and the effect undeniably Camp.

As previously established, the color blue in Del Rey’s work encompasses a multitude of potential interpretations, at times even presenting contradictory meanings. Never has this been better illustrated than in the final stanzas of the poem:

Standing stoic blue and denim
eyes not blue but clear like
heaven

you don't want to be forgotten
You just want to disappear (lines 56-60)

Although the speaker stands “stoic blue” (line 56), her eyes are “not blue but clear” (line 57). Despite the clarity in her gaze, she is not free of all her anxieties; she is struck by her long-awaited vision, yet remains stoic. In this instance, the color blue suggests her budding optimism as much as her lingering apathy. If these closing stanzas mirror her internal struggle, they also introduce a new obstacle in her poetic journey. Indeed, they capture the conflicting desires that artists often experience, namely the pursuit of recognition while seeking privacy. This might be a nod to Del Rey’s own career experiences, namely her having issues living under constant scrutiny, a theme she explores in her song “13 Beaches” (2017):

It took thirteen beaches to find one empty
But finally, it’s mine
With drippin’ peaches, I’m camera-ready
Almost all the time (0:43-1:06)

The song recounts an attempt to escape paparazzi while sunbathing, with the lyrics conveying the distress the medias cause her. While she would like to find “somethin’ real” (2:09-2:13), she devotes much of her time to staying camera-ready, feeling pressured to maintain her photogenic image. The mention of “drippin’ peaches” helps paints a relatively sensual picture, which somewhat intersects with the paintings of O’Keeffe; however, if the speaker wants to leave a long-lasting impact like O’Keeffe, she refuses to sacrifice her freedom for the sake of recognition. Her primary goal is to explore her art unburdened by external expectations. She contemplates the motivations driving her poetic aspirations, which prompts her to find a new balance between her past experiences and her ongoing growth. This perspective is evident in the subsequent pictures, which hark back to her previous works; the first two images depict the industrial port of Long Beach under a clear blue sky, while the next pages feature a black-and-white photograph of a woman reading on the grass and a monochromatic, satellite-like image of a meteor.

2.9. SportCruiser

In the meandering, prose-like poem “SportCruiser,” the speaker explains that she has taken flying and sailing lessons after a romantic breakup. Hoping to improve her instincts and navigate life more effectively, she finds herself paralyzed instead, experiencing a “midlife meltdown navigational exercise / in self-examination” (lines 50-51) during one of her classes, a turmoil that reflects her lingering sense of doubt:

during my fourth lesson in the sky, my instructor –
younger than i but as tough as you – instructed me to do a
simple maneuver. It's not that i didn't do it but i was
slow to lean the SportCruiser into a right hand upward turn.
Scared. Scared that i would lose control of the plane
Not tactfully and not gentle the instructor shook his head
and without looking at me said, "you don't trust yourself." (lines 32-38)

While her recent poems brim with self-confidence, she now admits that she still does not trust herself, which leads her to question her legitimacy as a "navigator – a captain of the sky" (line 23). If her inability to execute piloting maneuvers surely conceals "a deeper meaning" (line 43), she realizes that these uncertainties are what make her a fully-fledged poet, the narrative voice reconciling herself with the idea that "captains aren't like poets" (line 114) anyway. Within this framework, the poem depicts her efforts to find an artistic path in the absence of a definite destination; her escapades on boats and jets thus serve as metaphors for her journey of self-discovery.

Another celebration of the speaker's poetic identity, "SportCruiser" emerges as a wordy, albeit casual conversation between the speaker and her audience. Indeed, for the second time in the collection, she openly acknowledges the presence of readers, urging them not to tell her reasons for enrolling in flight training: "Don't tell anyone" (line 21). Comparing herself to "a broken record stuck on loop" (line 18), she explains that these lessons were only a ploy to avoid calling her ex-boyfriend and "parking on the block where [their] old place used to be" (line 2), even though she admits to sometimes "park[ing] on that street / and hav[ing] lunch in the car" (lines 6-7) just to feel close to him. By recounting this anecdote, which she herself concedes is "[p]athetic" (line 6), she fosters a stronger relationship with readers. This bond reaches a new high, however, when she reveals that she signs up for the classes under the pseudonym "Elizabeth / Grant" (lines 53-54), the legal name of Del Rey. The speaker goes on to describe how her instructors remain oblivious to her identity, which is all the more ironic as they end up sailing over "the vibrant bay / of Marina Del Rey" (lines 52-53).

Whether in music or poetry, personas involve a complex, if not paradoxical interplay between authenticity, performance, and artistic embellishment, which, as previously discussed, ought to be analyzed in light of Camp:

Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing too readily everything we are shown. (Dyer 13)

As with all instances of Camp, it is difficult, yet worthwhile to consider the extent to which it is self-aware and draws attention to its own artifices; that the speaker of "SportCruiser" feels "as though [she] had somehow been found out" (line 39) after using the name Elizabeth Grant feels ironic, the remarkable literariness of this statement facilitating the adoption of a Camp reading. Similarly, the idea of Lana Del Rey taking a boat trip incognito to Marina Del Rey plays out like a slapstick comedy bit; it not only makes readers aware of Del Rey's masked participation in her poetry, but also traps her in what is essentially a pun-within-a-pun.

The irony is compounded when the speaker claims to be her most authentic self when people have no clue who Elizabeth Grant is: "No, the fisherman didn't care and so neither did I. / And for a brief moment I felt more myself than ever before" (lines 57-58). By naming her poetic persona after herself, Del Rey inevitably brings to mind the criticism she has faced in her career: "Journalist critiques of her work have often revolved around her (in)authenticity, arguments which are grounded in the relationship between her 'real' self (if such a thing exists) and the persona through which she performs" (Blackburn 83). Del Rey has repeatedly emphasized her valuing "honesty and authenticity [...] as important attributes that should not be dismissed as untrue" (Wolk 42), but rather as signifiers of a genuine, though inevitably constructed form of self-expression. These ideas are consistent with the way Camp always features an element of performativity; it leans towards "forms that are 'truly false', or, more accurately, forms that are 'true in their being false'" (Van de Port 865). That the narrative voice experiences a sense of liberation under the name Elizabeth Grant thus reflects the essence of Camp. After adopting this irony-laden persona, using artifice as a means of personal liberation, she sails beyond her initial doubts and gains "a tiny bit of deeper trust" (line 102) in herself.

Aside from the intruding presence of Del Rey's legal name, the remainder of the poem is equally ironic. At first glance, its content seems trivial; the speaker ventures into activities outside her comfort zone in an effort to forget her ex-partner. And yet, despite its apparent simplicity, the poem revels in a rich, gently absurd interplay of anachronisms, which readers should have by now come to expect. The overarching metaphor of self-trust derives from William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus" (1888), specifically its final lines, "I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul" (lines 15-16). Whereas Henley's lines are evocative of perseverance and willpower, "SportCruiser" reduces their solemnity to hilariously simple

lengths.⁴ As such, the speaker contrasts herself with captains and sky-masters, who, unlike poets, cannot “make metaphors between the sea and sky” (line 115). In her quest for self-assurance, she adopts the routine of her sailing instructor, a “self-proclaimed drunkard captain” (line 59), which involves daily expeditions to grocery stores and their parking lots to practice “feel[ing] which way the wind is blowing” (line 92). Del Rey thus lends “Invictus” an ironic touch, her reinterpretation making her narrative voice imitate a drunken sailor, earnestly studying air currents in parking lots. The idea of Elizabeth Grant “crouching in the middle / of the parking lot” (lines 90-91), outside a supermarket “with perfect housewives looking on” (lines 96-97), is (for fairly obvious reasons) Camp.

Absurd as it might seem, this episode proves to be a pivotal moment in the collection, bringing the speaker to a deeper understanding of her poetic abilities. It also testifies to her yearning for change, as evidenced by her taking sailing lessons rather than contacting her ex-boyfriend. The uncertainties she faces during these classes are clearly meant to mirror her artistic doubts; however, they also resonate with the “grief that came in waves” (line 18) she struggles to overcome in “What happened when I left you.” The difference with this poem lies in its self-awareness, the speaker understanding that all these endeavors bring her back to her true calling as a poet:

I sat waiting for him to tell me, “you don’t trust yourself.”
But he didn’t, so I said it for him.
“I don’t trust myself.”
He laughed, gentler than the pilot but still not realizing
that my failure in the exercise was hitting me at a much
deeper level.
“It’s not that you don’t trust yourself,” he said. “It’s simply
that you’re not a captain. It isn’t what you do” (lines 79-86).

She deduces that, if she is not a captain, she must be a poet, with the advice of her instructor validating her writing pursuits almost out of spite: “I’m not a captain / I’m not a pilot / I write” (lines 122-124). Just as her creative journey does not require a predetermined endpoint to be meaningful, her doubts have taught her invaluable lessons: “All this circumnavigating the earth

⁴ In the pre-choruses of “Lust for Life,” Del Rey also quotes these lines in a rather disturbing way. The song evokes the suicide of Peg Entwistle, a failed actress who jumped off the ‘H’ of the Hollywood sign in 1932—in the music video, Del Rey is seen dancing on top of the iconic landmark.

/ was to get back to my life / 6 trips to the moon for my poetry to arise” (lines 119-121). Far from hindrances, her uncertainties emerge as the essence of her poetic identity, with her poetry thriving precisely amidst ambiguity and doubt.

2.10. Quiet Waiter Blue Forever

At first glance, the next work in the collection, a one-stanza-long poem entitled “Quiet Waiter Blue Forever,” emerges as another heartfelt expression of love, the speaker this time fawning over a reserved, slightly sullen waiter. Using deceptively simple rhymes, she describes her “sweet waiter” as someone who “move[s] like water” (line 1). Though it might lack intricacy, the words “water” and “waiter” being similar both in spelling and pronunciation, the comparison helps paint the picture of a rather sulky man—water being an element prone to change, it suggests that this person is not as gentle as it seems. In fact, customers are unsatisfied with his services, the speaker even comparing him to “a silent woodworker from midnight till later” (line 3), who spends his nightshifts smiling “to no one [he] cater[s]” (line 2). Paradoxically, it is this very detachment that entices her, thereby echoing Del Rey’s inclination to praise men “without desire—or, even better, beyond desire” (Shaviro 38). Despite his somber demeanor, the speaker believes that this man has the potential to bring her happiness:

The way that i feel with you is something like aching
inside of my stomach the cosmos are baking
a universe hung like a mobile
the alignment of these planets unique
in me the earth moves around the sun (lines 5-9)

If the feelings she nurtures for this waiter are strong enough to build a whole universe, she can only hold this subdued romance for so long before it erupts. Ready to collapse upon itself, this universe will soon explode to create a blue, overflowing “water world” (line 11).

Given the content of previous poems, which, in addition to being open to a double sense, tend to revolve around a certain degree of artifice, it seems only appropriate to identify another reading of “Quiet Waiter Blue Forever,” one that aligns with the journey of the speaker—after all, Camp partakes in “symbolic constructs standing for something else, evoking a symbolic elsewhere” (Cleto 13). For one, the fact that the narrative voice creates a seamless, perfectly put-together universe suggests a certain level of stagecraft. Although this world is nothing but a fantasy, her ability to design an alternate reality posits her as a God-like figure. At the same

time, this made-up world relies so heavily on well-established, easily recognizable clichés that it only emphasizes its superficiality:

no land all sea
water world
sun chaser
tropic of cancer
southern equator (lines 10-15)

The frenetic pace at which these symbols follow one another not only impedes comprehension, but also introduces significant inconsistencies. Should this sun-chasing planet ever reach its desired destination, its water will instantly evaporate, which contradicts the idea of a no-land-all-sea word. The idea that this exotic land lies in the “southern equator” (line 15) also raises questions, since the Equator is a singular line that divides the Earth into northern and southern *hemispheres*—to make matters worse, the Tropic of Cancer lies north, not south, of the Equator. These symbols, reduced to mere aesthetic embellishments, ultimately detract from the poem’s coherence. In the spirit of Camp, the poem prioritizes style at the expense of content.

Nevertheless, these seemingly hollow symbols are consistent with the speaker’s earlier treatment of literary references. For instance, the line about the Tropic of Cancer references Henry Miller’s semi-autobiographical novel of the same name.⁵ A work of modernist literature, it explores Miller’s bohemian lifestyle as a struggling writer living in Paris. Aside from its experimental style and free-flowing prose, the novel is chiefly known for its explicit sexual content. Its exploration of themes such as freedom and existentialism could very loosely be applied to the transformative journey undertaken by the speaker, although this explanation alone is not sufficient to fully appreciate the reference. To understand its meaning, one needs to know that Del Rey’s zodiac sign is Cancer, a water sign governed by the moon and typically symbolized by a crab. These personal traits perfectly align with the motifs of the poem, since the speaker compares herself to a “crying crustacean / sunbathing on paper / moon” (lines 15-17). From this perspective, the reference to Miller serves a purpose beyond direct thematic relevance. Exploited for its aesthetic appeal and relatability potential, it is merely ornamental. Given the way it is integrated into the poem, that is, alongside a series of other hollowed-out symbols, it serves as a prime example of Del Rey’s approach to literary

⁵ On “Tomorrow Never Came” (2017), Del Rey also quotes the novel, singing, “Lay, Lady, lay on that side of a paradise / In the Tropic of Cancer” (0:39-0:50).

references, which are often “not intended as specific individual quotations, but as clouds of media that the listener can zoom into and out of, at any resolution or clarity, revolved or re-centred at will” (Morrison and Sledmere).

If Camp is “the consistently esthetic experience of the world” (Sontag 526), the impulse to reposition literary references within a much more individualistic discourse aligns with this type of experience. As a mode that exists for the sake of self-enjoyment, Camp still offers “a certain transcendence, providing a significant comment on art” (Kleinhans 196) through its seemingly apparent defects. Despite its inaccuracies and shortcuts, the poem seems aware of its own limitations, the narrative voice even acknowledging the extravagance of her cosmic daydreams. Even though she claims that she could “rewrite the beginning of this primordial ooze” (line 18) if given the chance, she comes to understand that her fantasies will never be fulfilled: “But who am i / just a girl in love dreaming on paper / rearranging the salt for the paper” (lines 23-25). Rather than rearranging planets in the manner of a God, she rearranges salt and pepper shakers, a contrast that grounds her in a far more humble reality—given the setting, the piece of paper on which the speaker writes might even be as ordinary as a restaurant napkin.

The content alone is not the starting point for such reflections, as the configuration and visual appearance of the poem are also indicative of the speaker’s self-awareness. In the hardback edition, a preliminary draft stands alongside the final version, with hand-scribbled remarks left apparent on the page. These nearly indecipherable comments consist of personal memos and self-reminders, such as “rhyme w moon?” or “weather Blue forever?” By making these annotations visible, the speaker invites readers into her creative process, sharing with them the revisions her work has undergone. In doing so, she succeeds in revealing “another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human” (Sontag 526) or, in this instance, what it means to be a poet. In editing and organizing her collection, the speaker molds her artistic vision into a coherent universe, with the imagery that runs throughout the poem highlighting her poetic abilities. While poetry might not help her build actual galaxies, it does provide her with a sense of control; it evolves beyond a mere channel of expression and into a source of identity formation. With that in mind, it should go without saying that Del Rey exercises some form of control over the way her poetry collection takes shape, and the selection of artworks seem to be the result of a conscious decision. Besides illustrating the journey of her narrative voice, the photographs enhance the overall impact of her poetry. The poems trace the emotional growth of the narrative voice, while the selected photographs, in the manner of a visual companion, provide readers with another means of

understanding her transformations. For instance, the image preceding “Quiet Waiter Blue Forever” is a two-page, black-and-white photograph of a woman asleep in a garden, using a magazine to shield her face from the sun, which results in her face being completely obscured. On a symbolic level, the image evokes the speaker’s deep involvement in her poetry, the anonymous woman being quite literally *immersed* in her book. In this regard, the color blue, which permeates both the poems and accompanying photographs of the collection, also serves as a visual marker, offering glimpses into the various phases of her journey. In this poem, she explains living in a “Summer / blue / Forever” (lines 28-30), implying that she is less anxious than in earlier works, as the subsequent poems can also attest.

2.11. My bedroom is a sacred place now – There are children at the foot of my bed
With its frightfully long, drawn-out title, the eleventh poem of the collection, “My bedroom is a sacred place now – There are children at the foot of my bed,” delves deeper into the ways poetry functions as a means for self-empowerment. In this instance, it helps the speaker distance herself from a tumultuous relationship, allowing her to confront “the true nature” (line 5) of a man she once dated. Another first-person, contemplative piece written in free verse, the poem reveals the events that transpired after her breakup, which echoes the premises of “What happened when I left you.” Whereas earlier works showcase her reluctance to expose personal secrets, this poem illustrates her growing confidence in addressing intimate narratives. Through feebly laughable, cringe-inducing maxims, such as “the devil is a real devil” (line 8) or “monsters don’t always know they are monsters” (line 9), she evaluates the emotional toll of this relationship, which compels her to reiterate her sense of self: “You said I don’t know who I am / But I do know who I am” (lines 15-16). Growing in optimism, she claims to no longer need someone else to handle her emotions, for she has now found comfort and a coping mechanism in poetry. Accordingly, to distance herself from the influence of this man, she immerses herself entirely into her craft—a cathartic process that culminates in her repeating the mantra-like statement “the more i step into becoming a poet the less / i will fall into being with you” (lines 40-41) five times at the end of her poem.

An extension of “Quiet Waiter Blue Forever,” this seven-stanza-long poem is evidence of the speaker’s growing appreciation for her creative abilities. She begins by mentioning a letter she wrote to her ex-boyfriend, which she refers to as “the beginning of [her] future poetry” (line 2), thereby imbuing her writing with artistic significance. This so-called “last letter” (line 1) provides her with another outlook on this man, helping her acknowledge his intentions for the first time, something she previously avoided: “I acknowledged who you were for the

first time. / I didn't call you by any other name / I let you know that I knew the true nature of your heart" (lines 3-5). The way she equates the act of writing with that of gaining insight marks another shift within her journey, as poetry now becomes a medium for revelation. In this sense, even though the term "last letter" evokes closure, it is anything but final, as it represents the birth of her creative journey.

The speaker goes on to describe the aftermath of her breakup. After her ex-boyfriend "burned the house down" (line 11), he tried to persuade her into thinking that she was "the one holding / the matches" (lines 12-13), thereby making her responsible for his manipulative behavior. In a burst of self-assurance, she counters such statements, suggesting that his blame-shifting comments are only a matter of "projection" (line 10). Trying to belittle her even further, this man insists that she does not know herself, which she argues is false. As such, the poem seems an attempt to correct his assumptions, the subsequent stanzas helping her restore her identity and self-worth. As a means for "identity formation," Camp can only reflect upon itself, that is, upon its own artificial nature, via a "whole dynamics of transition and transformation" (Cleto 13). That this poem stands out for the way it recycles and updates earlier symbols is thus hardly surprising; the whole collection thrives on a loop of self-referentiality. Accordingly, to assert her individuality, the speaker returns to the imagery of the eponymous poem:

I love Rose Gardens
I buy violets every time someone leaves me
I love the great sequoias of Yosemite
and if you asked my sister to describe the first thing she
thinks of when she thinks of me
she would say
woodsmoke (lines 17-23)

These earth-related symbols—roses, gardens, violets, sequoias, woodsmoke—recall the pastoral motif of "Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass," the implication being that the speaker has now found freedom. Still, the reference to woodsmoke (or "campfire smoke" in the audiobook) needs to be qualified; on its own, it shares more affinities with the Californian wildfires mentioned in other works, in which they stand as symbols of optimism as much as disaster. While this symbol most likely relates to the speaker's elusive, ever-changing nature, it mainly contributes to making her identity more uncertain. The fact that she describes herself using these symbols, previously used for various ends, sometimes to the point of contradiction,

reads counterproductive—that she relies on her sister’s words to strengthen her argument also thwarts her claim to no longer need external validation. As such, by being repeated, these symbols end up contradicting themselves, the speaker inadvertently draining them of any original meaning.

As a “temporary, improvised stage for self-invention,” Camp is a mode simultaneously “affected and spontaneous, passionate and detached” (Cleto 13), a tension that the following stanzas perfectly encapsulate:

I’m gentle
I’m funny
when I’m drunk
though I haven’t been drunk for 14 years

I go on trips to the beach with my friends who don’t know
that I’m crazy (lines 24-29)

In both stanzas, a relatively light-hearted image is immediately interrupted by a dissonant, more jarring element, ultimately challenging its initial optimism. Most striking is the interruption of a friendly seaside memory though the exclamation “I’m crazy” (line 29), shattering the seemingly carefree setting—an associative leap between madness and the sea that should recall the imagery of “Bare feet on linoleum.” Equally disturbing is her proudly claiming to be funny, but only under the influence, hinting at a past struggle with alcoholism.⁶ Instead of falling back into self-pity, however, she focuses on the challenges that she has already overcome, which motivates her to face those ahead: “I can do that. / I can do anything – / even leave you” (lines 30-32). That the speaker now believes she can achieve “anything,” rather than “nothing about everything,” suggests that she has overcome her previous paralysis, which allows her to take control of her life and distance herself from her partner.

The concluding stanza, from which the poem takes its title, is also indicative of her transformation: “because my bedroom is a sacred place now / there are children at the foot of my bed” (lines 33-34). Far from the lonesome, daughterless woman of “LA Who am I to Love You,” the speaker now finds herself surrounded by children. That she suddenly evolves into a maternal figure, with the comforting presence of children gathered around her bed, implies that

⁶ Del Rey has mentioned in multiple interviews that she struggled with alcoholism when she was younger, which led her to be sent away to a boarding school when she was fourteen (Heaf).

she has found a more mature and genuine form of fulfillment. As she explains, the longer she spends time in this “sacred place,” writing poetry or tending to children, the more confident she becomes, both in herself and her creative abilities: “and the longer i stay here, the more i am sure / that the more i step into becoming a poet the less / I will fall into being with you” (lines 39-41). As if the link she perceives between poetry and self-empowerment was not clear enough, she repeats this statement until it covers half of the page:

the more i step into
my poetry the less i will
fall into being with you
the more i step into my poetry the less i will
fall into being
with you
the
more
i step into becoming a poet
the less i will fall into
bed
with
you (lines 44-56)

The layout of the poem therefore complements its content; the ending lines flow across the page, evoking a sense of liberation, with the speaker stepping outside the boundaries of what was once limiting. Freed from previous anxieties, she now channels emotional wounds into poems of strength and resilience.

2.12. In the hills of Benedict Canyon

Although the following poem is not featured on Del Rey’s spoken-word album, its thematic content and placement align seamlessly with the speaker’s journey. Set “two months’ time” (line 3) after her last relationship, the poem finds her writing at twilight, gazing over the wastelands of the secluded, if not exclusive Benedict Canyon neighborhood. Listening absent-mindedly to the distant rumblings of the city, the speaker has “no reason for tears” (line 13) anymore, as she now feels “close to heaven” (line 15) for the first time in months. With a series of references to the Los Angeles cityscape, from Bella Drive to Sunset Boulevard and

Mulholland Drive, she claims to have finally found peace. If she now seems willing to share her stories, agreeing that there are “no more reasons to put off what [she] already know[s]” (line 19), she still takes pleasure in procrastinating, leaving her “big projects” (line 20) momentarily aside and reaching “for the phone / to call an old friend” (line 32) instead. As such, this twelfth poem sees her once again coming close to the vacant, albeit enticing “nothingness” mentioned in the eponymous poem—the fact that Los Angeles, the nightmarish city of the fourth poem, serves as the backdrop for this work should also raise concerns. Still, in spite of her making a few disturbing comments, the narrative voice seems ready to face whatever challenges Los Angeles might present to her. Standing on her apartment’s deck at night, watching the city from afar, she notes half unimpressed, half ironically that there is “nothing going on at 7:27” (line 25).

As a relatively brief, four-stanza-long poem that was not released digitally, “In the hills of Benedict Canyon” deserves perhaps less attention than its predecessors. Firmly rooted in the Camp sensibility, which finds satisfaction in creating a purely aesthetic experience, one that values ornamentation, ambiguity, and recuperation, this poem also operates as a self-satisfied recycling of earlier works. For instance, the speaker revisits the imagery of the sixth poem, “Never to Heaven,” particularly her wish to “never gaze as high as heaven” (line 2), as she now portrays herself “close to heaven” (line 15). Not unlike this poem, she grows achingly compassionate towards herself and lets herself be seduced by the simplicity of watching a “Starline bus” (line 6) or contemplating “how the Dodgers are doing” (line 30). The fact that the speaker enjoys such activities echoes the way Camp finds pleasure “in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the art of the masses” (Sontag 528). And because Camp is a “feat goaded on [...] by the threat of boredom” (Sontag 528), these activities prevent her from falling back into paralysis. Far from the vapid nihilism manifested in former poems, her detached attitude here emerges as an act of resistance, all the more so as it stands in stark contrast with the high-paced atmosphere of Los Angeles. To this extent, the poem attests to the speaker’s transformation. No longer doubting herself or her poetic abilities, she is confident that her “[l]ove has room to grow” (line 1) and that “everything comes down to a story” (line 11).

Such displays of joyful idleness, along with their subsequent examination, lend the poetry of Del Rey a distinctively melancholic tone. Caught between daydreams and nervous breakdowns, between a contemporary Los Angeles and an indefinable past, the reminiscences of her narrative voice find themselves temporally confused. Lounging on the patio, peeking over the city while her “green typewriter light is on” (line 2), she casually mentions cult leader Charles Manson and his most notorious victim, the late actress Sharon Tate, murdered in her

Benedict Canyon residence: “I listen to the hippie / spouting nonsense at the foot of Bella Drive / hammering on about Sharon and the sanctity of life” (lines 6-8). While the speaker claims that there are “[n]o double murder plots looming over” (line 4) this time around, the doomed actress still haunts the neighborhood more than fifty years after her death—a ghostly presence, she haunts the poem as well. For the Camp enthusiast, this passing reference to real-life tragedies is most appealing. Sharon Tate, in this context, is only acknowledged for the circumstances of her death, which conveniently occurred in Benedict Canyon. The process is not so different from that of “Bare feet on linoleum,” in which Sylvia Plath is reduced to her “trademark” suicide. Because of her surface-level, mythmaking approach to “American icons from the 1950s and 1960s,” Del Rey tends to afflict her references “with an iconoclastic gesture” (Fetveit 201). By enlisting these figures into her opaque and meticulously stylized aesthetic, she inadvertently compromises their complexity. In itself, her references “are not specific works by earlier artists, but the figures of the artists themselves, and the cultural shortcuts these artists have become” (Morrison and Sledmere). Much like the rest of Del Rey’s work, this poem “dislocates history” for the sake of aesthetic, creating “a contrarian mess of remixed and adapted ideas” (Crutcher 248) that is incredibly Camp.

As poor taste as it might be, the reference to Sharon Tate gains significance if one considers the preceding poems; the “murder plots looming over” (line 4) Benedict Canyon form a cross-reference with the “Tudor house that borne a thousand murder / plots” (lines 40-41) in the fourth poem, “LA Who am I to Love You.” By re-using the term “murder plots,” the speaker invites readers to consider the transformation she has undergone between these two poems. Far from the groupie willing to surrender herself to Los Angeles, the speaker now distances herself from its chaos. Instead of presenting a seductive image of the city, she acknowledges its inability to develop: “no new dev breaking ground on Sunset / no big building lasting too long up on Mulholland / no joint ventures fracturing” (lines 21-23). A desolate city with “no news, nothing going on” (line 25), Los Angeles seems less intimidating than before. The subsequent paratextual elements also point in this direction, as the following page features a poorly framed image of a shirtless man walking by a low-end smoke shop, evocative of the city’s most deprived neighborhoods.

2.13. happy / Sugarfish / ringtone

A turning point in the collection, the subsequent section finds the speaker pursuing happiness with unprecedented determination, which she claims to find by entering a new relationship. The imagery-rich, romantic style of “happy,” a nine-stanza-long poem that reads like an ode, is

somewhat reminiscent of her initial works, as the speaker expresses adoration for a man through a series of slightly overblown declarations. Along with listing the reasons why her new partner is essential to her happiness, she also explains prioritizing emotional fulfillment over financial wealth. While each stanza makes explicit mention of her wealth, she insists that no amount of money could compare to the moments she has shared with her boyfriend, thereby challenging the assumptions some have made about her in the past—people have said that she is rich, and she is, but “not how they think” (line 19). As a matter of fact, she explains living “under the freeway” (line 2), which no doubt contrasts with the idea of her leading an opulent lifestyle. The image covering the next two pages, which depicts a modest suburban house, functions as a visual confirmation of this humble way of life. Rather than focusing on the monetary value of things, the speaker finds contentment in modest activities, such as listening to “the rushing cars above” (line 6) her house, driving her truck with the radio on, or putting her partner “on speaker / and chat for hours underneath the trees” (lines 37-38). In essence, the poem emerges as an effort to challenge the assumptions people have made about her wealth. The speaker repeatedly emphasizes the pleasure she derives from the simplest things, with the idea being that happiness can be found in day-to-day scenes, if one is attuned to appreciating them.

Similar ideas are explored in the subsequent, relatively brief poem “Sugarfish,” in which the speaker reiterates her wish to “stick to something sweet” (line 1). She lists further activities that bring her joy, leaving her with a long-lasting sense of pleasure akin to having “sugar sugar in [her] teeth” (line 4). Among these, she mentions kissing her boyfriend, drinking a “Dodger Stadium Slurpee” (line 7), letting the “white confection in the sea” (line 8) froth over her body, dipping her toes in a bath made of honey, and going out to “Sugarfish San Vicente” (line 3), a sushi restaurant in the Westside of Los Angeles. This almost palpable “sweetness” infuses the entire poem, to the point it literally sticks to the page; the paper on which the poem is typed features a yellow stain, and the accompanying photograph shows a packet of candy spilling over sheets of paper. As visual expressions of the speaker’s emotional state, these elements convey her enthusiasm for the simplest pleasures of life, their sweetness extending beyond their textual confines.

Because she “stayed all night in that bathwater” (line 15), the speaker finds herself covered in sugar, fingers and hands included, which prevents her from texting her boyfriend properly:

Sugar sugar lips and teeth
fingertips touch emojis
hard forever
hearts on fleek
bb please come over (lines 21-25)

Her dexterity is slightly impaired, causing the concluding stanza to be more succinct than the others. She even resorts to an abbreviation in the final line, incorporating SMS language into her poem, which amplifies its playful and “sweet” tone. That the speaker has found someone who fulfills her desires is an idea that extends to the following work, a one-stanza-long poem titled “ringtone,” in which she confesses to using a “third phone” (line 1) solely to contact her partner—only he has the number to that phone and therefore his “own ringtone” (line 3).

What differs above all from previous poems is this celebration of happiness. While the writing remains at times clichéd, all the more so as these three poems speak of unconditional love, they exude a certain warmth, the tone being that of pleasure. If Camp reveals itself in an “extravagant form that is out of proportion to its content, especially when that content is banal or trivial” (Kleinhans 186), the candid declarations of the speaker perfectly encapsulate this sensibility. As if this romance had made her a teenager again, she explains in “happy” that she keeps a safe, “the boyfriend box” (line 29), in which she stores various keepsakes that remind her of “all the things [she has] loved and lost and loved again / unconditionally” (lines 32-33). Infatuated with her new boyfriend, she turns to highly unusual imagery, comparing their last sexual encounter to the rhythm of Los Angeles traffic: “the last time we made love / how the noise got louder and louder during rush hour” (lines 8-9). By professing love through a sequence of wonderfully ordinary gestures, such as dining at a chain sushi restaurant or making love to the noise of the highway, the poems readily embrace the essence of Camp, delivering a “comforting fantasy in its repetitive romantic tedium, an all-consuming, unsustainable love on an endless loop” (Fowles 23) characteristic of Del Rey’s work.

In “Sugarfish,” the speaker explains that her thoughts have become “blue and borrowed” (line 20), thereby alluding to the English folk rhyme that details what a bride should wear for her wedding—something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. The image suggests her commitment to this relationship; however, there are hints of doubt scattered across these three poems, suggesting that she might not be ready to make such a decision. For instance, she writes in the same poem that she “can’t keep the bees off of [her]” (line 18), a vague statement that contrasts with the overarching whimsical imagery. These underlying emotions

come to the forefront in “ringtone,” as she admits to being entirely dependent on her partner and his actions:

i like u so much
but it makes me nervous when you don't call
under my breath i say
Don't make me be resilient (lines 8-11)

If this man allows her to be her authentic self, she claims that he will be “the first one who ever did” (line 14), implying that her previous relationships did not grant her such freedom and, by inference, that this man does not either. Despite their childlike appearances, the poems lend themselves to an ambiguous reading, ultimately casting doubt on the authenticity of her happiness. Noteworthy is that Tessa DiPietro makes a subtle reappearance in “Sugarfish,” advising the speaker on her new relationship: “A fortune teller once told me / do things that you think are sweet and a sweet man is sure to follow” (lines 10-11). Based on this advice, it is possible that the speaker only pretends to find “sweetness” in ordinary pursuits, or she might be dating the wrong person altogether. That the speaker is not as satisfied as she claims is also reflected in the visual choices, the photographs found among these three poems being relatively bleak. For instance, the photograph alongside “happy” depicts a water tower silhouetted against the light, whereas the picture next to “ringtone” is close-up shot of a silver platter carrying a cell phone and various medication bottles. The next black-and-white photograph does not appear for another ten pages, as if the speaker’s poetic journey has been interrupted or put on hold. What really substantiates such ideas, however, is the content of the subsequent poems, in which the speaker reveals that she refused a marriage proposal.

2.14. In the flats of Melrose

Next to the image of a poorly lit street corner at nightfall is “In the flats of Melrose,” another poem missing from the spoken-word album, in which the speaker contemplates her feelings towards her boyfriend, a film director named “Josiah” (line 29). Depicting herself as a “sad heroine tied to the last / car” (lines 2-3), she imagines herself trapped in this relationship, struggling to reconcile her desires with his. Although she admits to loving this man, she is overwhelmed by the extent of her dependence upon him, which leads her to question her self-worth. Structured as a monologue addressed to this man, the poem sees the speaker being once

again tormented by indecision. Even though she knows that her boyfriend has become a burden, she remains unsure whether she should end the relationship.

The speaker's pervasive feeling of being "bound up like the sad heroine tied to the last / car" (lines 2-3) sets the melodramatic tone of the poem; it also reveals her desire to break free from the influence of her partner. Indeed, the urgency in her question, "What will it take for me not to need you" (line 4), suggests deep exhaustion. Striving for a relationship that could substantiate her well-being, she now refuses to play the archetypal damsel in distress: "Not you as the savior / not me as Ophelia" (lines 7-9). Evidently, the speaker here references the tragic heroine driven to madness and suicide in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), implying that she has no intention of following her fate. By drawing a comparison between her situation and that of Ophelia, she builds on her self-mythologizing; the reference helps her heighten the intensity of her distress, Ophelia's suicide being exploited for its melodramatic potential. It is worth noting that this reference is in keeping with Sylvia Plath's so-called "watery grave" (line 3) in "Bare feet on linoleum," since Shakespeare's character dies by drowning in the play. By bringing these well-known figures together and, more importantly, positioning herself as their equal, the speaker establishes an exceptionally Camp relationship, even more so as it draws on different contexts—Plath is a real-life poet and Ophelia a fictional character.

After such declarations, she transitions to a brighter scene, recalling seemingly banal, yet cherished moments that she has spent with this person, such as going to the mountains, playing outside with cats, or listening to the radio by the fireplace:

Topanga on Sunday?
two cats in the yard
NPR rumbling quietly
a fire in the hearth (lines 10-13).

If she believed at the time of these events that "not every marriage ends in the dissolution" (line 18), the way she phrases such ideas carries a hint of skepticism. Determined to preserve the happiness she once found in her relationship, the speaker was first willing to face any obstacle: "nothing could step me no valley too far / to walk through in darkness to keep us apart" (lines 15-16). Her crossing a valley in darkness holds a geographical significance that cannot be underestimated, since the lines refer to Topanga Canyon, a place inextricably linked to Charles Manson, at least in Del Rey's mind. In her song "Heroin" (2017), she delves into the history of this place, located in the Santa Monica Mountains, which was once inhabited by

Manson and his cult following. Throughout the song, she paints the picture of a Topanga Valley that is slowly deteriorating, while she herself grows mad from living there:

Topanga's hot today, Manson's in the air
And all my friends have gone, 'cause they still feel him here
I want to leave, I'll probably stay another year
It's hard to leave when absolutely nothing's clear (1:52-2:22)

Even though she recognizes the necessity of moving out, she struggles to leave this place behind, a situation that should recall that of the poem. The Manson-reference also echoes the twelfth poem, whose title, "In the hills of Benedict Canyon," bears a striking resemblance to the present one, "In the flats of Melrose." All three instances mention Charles Manson within a context of disillusionment, alluding to the difficulty of moving on from the past. Although the reference remains implicit in this poem, it helps suggest that the speaker has lost faith in her ability to overcome challenges.

Even though it would be "enough just for [her] / to be sitting in the flats of Melrose" (lines 25-26), the poem reveals a disconnect between her priorities and those of her partner. Whereas she wholeheartedly dedicates herself to her relationship, this man is only concerned with his professional career. Describing him as "a tallboy cracked open" (line 28), she voices her frustration by lamenting his tendency to be "hell-bent on being some indie director / or whatever pipe dream [he and his friends] are smoking" (lines 23-24). These sentiments resonate with Del Rey's song "Norman Fucking Rockwell" (2019), on which she uses a similar tongue-in-cheek tone to describe her experience being in love with a self-important artist:

Goddamn, man-child
You act like a kid even though you stand six foot two
Self-loathing poet, resident Laurel Canyon know-it-all
You talk to the walls when the party gets bored of you (2:07-2:30)

The song title, which itself is peak Camp, should be understood as an irreverent commentary on romantic relationships. By name-dropping Rockwell in this manner, Del Rey incidentally dismantles his revered legacy, which includes his idealized representations of the American way of life, his infamous "Rockwellesque" paintings. In doing so, she exposes the often-disappointing truths concealed beneath the artist's canvas:

[I]t's kind of about this guy who is such a genius artist, he thinks he's the shit and he knows it, and he won't shut up talking about it. So, often, I ended up with these creative types, or not, or whatever, and they just go on and on about themselves, and I'm like, "Yeah, yeah." But there's a little bit of merit to it, also. They are so good. (World Record 7:00-7:25)

Del Rey's reduction of Rockwell to "a metaphorical figure for the side of the American dream [and] its hidden underbelly" (Vasak) is unmistakably Camp. This is all the more ironic as both have been criticized for romanticizing American suburbia, the work of Del Rey often being branded as "nostalgia for an old lie" (Fowles 22):

Through his art, Rockwell captured the very essence of the American Dream. However, these works, unsurprisingly, focused on the greener side of the grass [...]. In fact, it was Rockwell's idealism of American daily life which earned him varying degrees of condemnation from critics, despite his popularity and success. Thus, Rockwell's legacy recalls not only what is evident in his artwork, but more so what is *absent* from his work. (Gannon)

As with the song, the poem portrays a relationship that fails to live up to the fantasies initially imagined, with the speaker simultaneously regretting and embracing her disillusion. Del Rey tends to sing about "dysfunctional, often toxic, relationships" in her songs, conjuring up "the duality of the American dream and the American people's love-hate relationship with its mythic ideal" (Gannon). Still, while her song "Norman Fucking Rockwell" suggests that settling for something less than perfect is an inevitable compromise, her narrative voice begs to differ. She laments that she cannot find fulfillment in a relationship that falls short of her ideals. As a last resort, she tells her boyfriend that she "could still make [him] happy" (line 31), before ending the poem with a final toast to her relationship: "Let's pour one out / to knowing / not hoping" (lines 32-34). By shifting the emphasis from hope to knowledge, she seems to have made up her mind, signaling her readiness to bid farewell to her boyfriend. To this extent, "In the flats of Melrose" marks another transition in the collection, with the speaker adopting a slightly less idyllic view of relationships by the end of the poem.

2.15. Thanks to the Locals

A direct follow-up to the preceding poem, “Thanks to the Locals” sees the completion of what is explained in previous sections; even though the speaker believes that “it would’ve been easier to stay” (line 84), she decides to leave her boyfriend anyway. While he is engrossed in a film shoot, she runs away to Lake Arrowhead, an area located in the southern part of California, where she attends an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting. This clandestine journey follows his asking her in marriage, a proposal primarily motivated by his mother’s impending death and his inability to fathom a “life without a woman in it” (line 23). The speaker finds the proposal highly inappropriate, noting that “[n]ot everyone needs to pretend to love their girlfriend just / because their mother is dying” (lines 77-78). For all that, the poem sees her reassess her desires against his offer, with her distress becoming increasingly palpable as the stanzas unfold. An intimate, deeply introspective piece, “Thanks to the Locals” explores how past romantic experiences have tarnished her self-esteem, even though it also testifies to her ability to put insecurities aside and distance herself from someone wrong for her.

In contrast to her latest poems, which see her celebrate the “sweetness” of her new relationship, the speaker now casts a skeptical shadow over her earlier understanding of love. She laments that it could have only been “[a]s sweet as a junkie’s concept of love can be” (line 58), thereby hinting that the intensity of her feelings might have clouded her judgment. The poem suggests that she tolerated situations she would not otherwise have endured, so that her share during the AA meeting “read[s] like a tale of a battered housewife” (line 6). The fact that “[t]he rehab kids in the back row sto[p] throwing spitballs” during her speech underscores the gravity of her experience, the local attendees finding themselves compelled to pause and acknowledge the weight of her story. Another regular, a woman named Kira, meets her in the parking lot after the session, but finds herself unable to give her any help, confessing, “I don’t really have much advice for you” (line 15). Alienated and progressively desperate, the speaker explains feeling in “the wrong place wrong season wrong time” (line 18), an emotional low she neatly sums up in a single thought: “I fucking hate my life” (line 10).

Her attending the AA meeting becomes a turning point in the collection, as it marks a radical shift in tone. Unlike previous works, in which the speaker subtly alludes to past hardships, she now details her feelings of inadequacy with troubling honesty. As such, her blunt, unfiltered descriptions convey the sensation that she is typing straight out of her head, pouring her memories directly onto the page. And yet, despite their emotional weight, the lines seem somewhat crafted. Certain sentences, such as “I fucking hate my life” (line 10) or “The man that I love hates me” (line 42), are so imbued with solemnity that they beg to be read with ironic

distance. As a result, readers cannot but question the nature of these words, whether they are sincere or overdramatic. It should be noted that this “disparity between high seriousness and the absurd” (Long 53), which is the hallmark of Camp, remains incomplete without the adequate response from readers:

The process of camp might be called dialectical. It asserts an opposition between the absurd and the serious. Then it gestures toward a point—a moment of consciousness, a shock, a synthesis—from which that opposition can be seen as absurd in turn, based on a higher and more encompassing sense of absurdity, since it includes far more in its sway. (Long 54-55)

Camp “turns continually outward,” that is, toward “bringing about such a moment in the consciousness that views it” (Long 55). Whether she intentionally heightens her feelings for artistic purposes or not is irrelevant; because Camp entrusts “its ultimate act of creation so completely to the spectator, it makes no real difference whether it is deliberate or naïve” (Long 55). The intended meaning fades against the perception of readers—that readers are never given a definitive answer is precisely what makes the poem so appealing.

By means of example, the speaker dramatically compares her breakup to one of the “big battles [...] / unbeknownst to everyone” (lines 55-56), an “unchained melody / in [her] heart” (lines 63-64), and a “step / blindly / into the abyss” (lines 66-68). Still, despite the occasional bloated lines, the poem maintains a relatively coherent imagery, particularly in its references to sweetness:

How would I handle driving down your street and it becoming a
distant memory
not reality
no longer sweet.
Sweet the way it tastes in my mouth to say your name
sweet like when I was young, driving down those roads before we
were done (lines 48-54)

Even when she explains the reasons for the breakup, she resorts to another sugar-related comparison, likening her intuition to a slice of cake:

But there's always been just a little tiny piece of me inside
the size of a small slice of angel cake that knew
somewhere somehow
That I deserved better than someone like you. (line 29-32)

Used to evoke happiness, assurance, nostalgia, and disappointment all at once, the imagery might seem incongruous at first, although this contradiction takes on meaning if one adopts a Camp reading. If intentional, it helps convey the idea that the speaker possesses the assurance to move forward, even though it pains her to leave something familiar behind. While it previously inspired happiness, the sugar imagery now carries a darker undertone. To this extent, its re-appearance in the poem could be read as a marker of change, signifying another phase within her journey.

Unsure about her future path, she once again finds herself with “no destination intact” (line 69). In spite of this, she resolves to go through with her decision, guided by “the only direction set in [her] [c]ompass — to move forward” (line 70). Hoping to be “closer to something big and free” (line 60), she heads towards the Rim of the World Highway, a scenic roadway near Lake Arrowhead, which offers sweeping views of the surrounding San Bernardino Mountains. Alone in nature, she is reminded that “some things are beautiful for no reason” (line 76). This highway, whose name feels almost allegorical of her personal situation, becomes a canvas onto which she projects her contemplations. If this natural world triggers an introspection, the act of writing it down offers her the mental space necessary to process it:

Anyway
I don't have a pretty couplet to give resolution to his poem
nothing very eloquent to say

except that I was brave
and it would've been easier to stay (lines 80-84)

In recounting this event, she allows herself to be vulnerable. Evidently, this vulnerability is not only directed to the attendees of the AA meeting, to whom she shares her traumatic story, but also extends to readers, as she provides them with her innermost thoughts. Unveiling these aspects of her life is in line with her desire to share personal stories, and her admission to not knowing how to conclude her poem highlights her readiness to embrace imperfections. The act

of writing poetry thus evolves beyond a mere creative pursuit and into a therapeutic outlet, giving her enough power to be “brave” (line 83) and leave her boyfriend.

For all that, the ending stanzas demand a more nuanced interpretation. If recognizing one’s limitations implies vulnerability, within the context of the collection, it also conveys a sense of detachment. The fact that the speaker leaves her poem essentially unfinished gives the impression that she has lost interest in it. Moreover, her admitting to not feeling “eloquent” (line 82), despite her earlier comparisons to a creative God, represents a delightfully Camp paradox. This inconsistency might suggest that the breakup has awakened her sense of doubt; as she explains, it might have been the right decision, but not the easiest. The accompanying artwork is a black-and-white photograph of a man reading a magazine, a visual representation of this ex-boyfriend—a male presence that contrasts with previous artworks, which had so far only depicted women. On the subsequent pages are two colored photographs: the first one shows electric pylons at sunrise, and the second, an undefined landscape beneath a blue sky. These visual elements evoke the narrative voice’s emotional trajectory, from dark to blue. Between these evocative images are two standalone sentences, “I’m writing my future” and “The universe exists / because we are aware of it,” each of which occupies an entire page. These succinct declarations recall her commitment to shaping her future through the power of poetry, with the implication that the speaker still wishes to share her stories with readers. And yet, despite these encouraging elements, the last poems of the collection are particularly ambiguous, leaving the impression that she has strayed from her previous beliefs.

2.16. Paradise is Very Fragile

The next poem in the collection, titled “Paradise is Very Fragile,” finds the speaker “fighting toxic red tides” (line 3) in Florida, struggling to maintain hope in a world affected by climate change. After a string of references to deadly hurricanes, overfishing, rising sea levels, and wildfires, she shifts focus to her latest relationship, drawing parallels between global disasters and this recent heartbreak. Given that the events she mentions mainly unfold in the United States, she takes the liberty to make a (thinly veiled) criticism of former President Donald Trump, who was still in office when the book was published: “Our leader is a megalomaniac and we’ve seen that before / but never before it was what the country deserved” (lines 18-19). A blend of social criticism, political concerns, and biblical symbolism, this eighteenth poem stands out for its emotional intensity, the speaker voicing her despair as she contemplates the origins of humanity, gloomily noting that “[n]ot everyone’s nature is good or golden / and you can’t fight what’s in your nature” (lines 39-40).

The narrative voice opens her poem by raising a series of concerns over the fragility of paradise, a metaphor for the deteriorating conditions in the United States; however, it appears that she mostly finds in this degradation an opportunity to highlight her own problems. The opening lines, “Paradise is very fragile / and it seems like it’s only getting worse” (lines 1-2), immediately set the stage for a conflation of personal and environmental concerns. As it turns out, this recent preoccupation with climate change stems from the loss of her childhood treehouse, recently destroyed by “the Woosley fires” (line 8). Describing this treehouse as if it were her ex-boyfriend, she likens its destruction to a breakup, the Californian wildfires now serving as a convenient metaphor for a failed relationship: “who would’ve thought this year at 33 you would be taken out / from under me / after all those years” (lines 9-11). She regrets not having been able to save either the treehouse or the relationship, and her rescue attempts left her exhausted:

That’s all I kept thinking about as we were fighting the fires
in Agoura
That I’m tired of fighting you.
Tired of you taking from me (lines 41-44)

As the stanzas unfold, this ex-boyfriend is revealed to be an environmental predator, someone who continuously takes away from her without ever giving anything in return—a dynamic she captures by exclaiming, “And you take and you take and you take and you take” (line 55). She expands this idea by comparing him to the “inhabitants that thrive off / of paradise” (line 36), who carelessly exploit its natural resources until it has “nothing left to give” (line 38). Beyond any doubt, this environmental backdrop serves as a pretext for addressing personal issues, the recurring comparisons the speaker draws between climate change and her own predicament being clear indications of this tendency. Whether she dramatizes her feelings or downplays the gravity of climate change, the result is that the sincerity of her words is called into question, this interplay between personal and ecological themes inevitably limiting the depth of her environmental concerns.

The relentless taking of this man exhausts the “little bit of / paradise” (lines 28-29) within her, leaving the speaker emotionally drained by the end of the poem: “but my heart is very fragile / and I have nothing left to give” (lines 63-64). To add to the melodrama, the right-hand page is stained with a few drops of water, suggesting tears, as if the speaker had wept while writing the poem. If the poem ends on a dramatic note, the preceding stanzas are no less

charged. One of them sees her threatening institutionalization should her dreams fail to be realized:

My friends tell me to stop calling 911 on the culture
But it's either that or I 5150 myself
They don't understand
I'm a dreamer
And I had big dreams for the country (lines 20-24)

Unable to end climate change or assist her country, the speaker contemplates “5150” (line 21) herself, a reference to the Welfare and Institutions Code of California, which authorizes the involuntary psychiatric commitment of someone in a state of mental distress. If her dismay seems genuine, her treatment of environmental issues remains superficial, making her sermon for America seem relatively shallow—the United States surely needs saving, but her “calling 911 on the culture” (line 20) might not be the prescription it craves. Her so-called big dreams for the country, which include advising America on “[h]ow it could think how it could dream” (line 26), amount to painfully simplistic, deluded fantasies, with the implication being that the speaker never intended to bring about radical change in the first place.

This disengaged approach is all the more striking in the final stanza, as the poem unexpectedly veers into spiritual imagery, leaving aside any chance of exploring the theme of climate change. She initiates this shift by comparing her condition to the biblical “curse / bestowed upon Eve” (lines 46-47), who is said to have introduced sin into the world. By likening herself to Eve and her curse, she implies that her recent decisions have had equally profound and far-reaching consequences, elevating her experiences to biblical proportions. She invokes the Kundalini in the same breath, a form of divine feminine energy in Hinduism supposed to be awakened through yoga:

that faithful eve
she took that bite
from that fruitful tree
You breathe me in
kundalini (lines 48-52)

Immersed in what seems to be a transcendental state, during which “watercolor images of serpents on orange trees quietly arise” (line 60), the narrative voice describes her ex-boyfriend as “the beach in a kiss” (line 56) and “candy for [her] watery eyes / in [her] veins that roll” (lines 57-58). This fanciful, hallucinatory-like aside sharply contrasts with the other stanzas, as it is entirely disconnected from their overarching theme of climate change—an inconsistency that only emphasizes the self-absorption tendencies of the speaker, this aside merely helping her magnify her personal distress.

A poem that seeks to address the evils of climate change, but ultimately reveals itself to be socially unaware, “Paradise is Very Fragile” firmly embodies the essence of Camp. One might be tempted to argue that Del Rey’s narrative voice performs deconstruction, that by writing such narratives, she hopes to elicit a strong reaction from readers, thereby encouraging them to question the outrageousness of her statements:

It might be too painful to experience life as if it were a movie, so we insist, for our own sakes, that Del Rey must be ironic, that she is deconstructing something, that she is telling stories of fictional characters from whom we can maintain a respectable distance, or that these stories are only about her, someone who we can relentlessly critique for claiming to speak only to majoritarian values.
(Simmons)

Such ideas would be in contradiction with Camp, which “introduce[s] an attitude which is neutral with respect to content,” rendering any of its instances “disengaged, depoliticized” (Sontag 517). Far from being an act of derision or defiance against authority, Camp is nothing more than “a moral insensitivity to value” (Long 59). The “possibilities for fantasizing” in the poem are “so simplified that they seem isolated and ridiculous” (Kleinhans 186), while the ideas surrounding climate change are “merely consumed, treated as indistinguishable units of unexamined information” (Long 59). Despite this seemingly opaque framework, the poem still reveals something about the speaker’s emotional state. While the parallels she draws between climate change and herself might be controversial, they serve as a means through which she channels her genuine distress. As previously mentioned, Camp favors style over content, and “[s]tyle, when successful, is sincere about something, no less than the most imperious earnestness” (Long 69). Accordingly, when she compares her situation to that of Eve or the United States, it is a sincere gesture; these comparisons help her convey the idea that her personal life is falling apart, much like the world around her.

2.17. Salamander

The final full-length poem within the collection, which spans three pages without filling all their available space, finds the speaker fleeing to San Pedro, a coastal neighborhood located near Long Beach, in an effort to escape a man harassing her. This person, described as a “salamander” (line 1) with “worn warm after-work hands” (line 6), tries to persuade her into publishing her stories, which she categorically refuses. Because this man fails to understand that “things that can’t be bought can’t be evaluated” (line 23), she finds herself compelled to explain the motivations behind her writing:

You see I’m a real poet

My life is my poetry
my lovemaking is my legacy

My thoughts are not for sale
they’re about nothing
and beautiful and for free (lines 15-20)

Although the poem initially adopts an introspective, diary-like tone, it soon evolves into more grandiose statements; the speaker describes her poetry as “something metaphysical” (line 29) and “beyond human reach” (line 24), affirming that it cannot be “deciphered or metabolized” (line 28). Despite these confident assertions, the poem ends the collection on a rather ambiguous note, as this emphasis on her poetic abilities almost seems an attempt to reassure herself, leaving readers to decide whether she truly qualifies as a poet.

As such, “Salamander” follows in the vein of previous works, offering readers yet another campy fusion of anachronisms. It begins with a plea from the speaker, who asks an intrusive, salamander-like character to leave her in peace. While salamanders are an actual group of amphibians, the poem here alludes to the mythical, lizard-shaped creature believed to withstand fire. Still, the speaker slightly veers away from these mythological connotations to associate the animal with the fitness brand SoulCycle, best known for its spiritually-charged workout classes: “Get out of my blood salamander / I can’t seem to blow off enough steam to get you out of my head / SoulCycle you to death” (lines 1-3). That she cannot “blow off enough steam” (line 1) to reject the business offers of this man, given the associations generated by the salamander and the yuppie, megachurch-like corporation, forms a wordplay as absurd as it is

clever. This salamander, which urges her to publish her poems, emerges as a symbol for the expectations she tries to avoid in previous works. She resists his pressure on the grounds that some stories are not meant to be sold, her poetry itself being too personal to be commercialized. From this perspective, her wish to leave her poems “underneath the nightstand to be forgotten” (line 8) is consistent with her wanting to let her poetry exist on its own terms. That her thoughts are “about nothing / and beautiful and for free” (lines 19-20) reinforces an idea that runs throughout the collection, namely that poetry can be a deeply personal and liberating means of expression, regardless of its commercial value.

As the poem nears its end, she returns to its initial mythological imagery, echoing her earlier comparisons to a creative deity:

A thing perfect and ready to become a part of the texture of
the fabric of Something more ethereal
like Mount Olympus
where Zeus and Athena and the rest of the immortals play (lines 33-36)

Once more, the speaker elevates her poetry to divine levels, underlining its significance and enduring impact, in addition to the transcendence it can provide. The absurd associations in “Salamander,” which sees the speaker associate a modern fitness brand with mythological tales, creates a dissonance that both confounds and entertains. As previously discussed, Camp thrives on the use of incongruous elements; it insists on an arbitrary recycling of symbols, ultimately proven inconclusive. The poem promotes a similar contradiction insofar as it introduces elements that resist interpretation. Indeed, the narrative voice herself acknowledges the elusive nature of her poems, describing them as undecipherable and “[u]ntouchable” (line 25). In a manner that can only be Camp, she explains how her poems transcend human interpretation by using symbols that are themselves beyond deciphering; her poetry is at once “Mount Olympus” (line 35), “something metaphysical” (line 29), a “part of the texture of the fabric of [s]omething more ethereal” (lines 33-34), and “a view of the sea / on a summer day on the most perfect winding road” (lines 30-31). While comparing her writing to such elements is itself poetic, the resulting composition lacks both cohesion and coherence. Del Rey seems “less devoted to playing with words themselves, than she is with images and surfaces” (Madden). In this regard, she is primarily concerned with the aesthetic quality of these comparisons. Rather than aiming for a coherent whole, she directs all her efforts towards crafting a dense arrangement of images.

It seems contradictory that the speaker no longer “want[s] to sell [her] stories” (line 7), since a significant part of the collection revolves around her wish to write poetry. Further ambiguity arises when she claims that her stories cannot be sold and should therefore remain unpublished:

I want to leave them underneath the nightstand to be forgotten
or remembered should my thoughts come upon them in the middle
of the night after a beach day
or by you some afternoon –
to thumb through – with your worn warm afternoon after-work hand (lines 8-12)

Del Rey originally intended to self-publish her collection for a symbolic dollar (Clark). These plans underwent a significant change, however, when the publishing company Simon & Schuster Inc. acquired the rights to the collection and published it at a standard price, thereby making the statement of her narrative voice a paradox. If “Salamander” confronts the person urging her to publish her poems, some of its lines bear an uncanny resemblance to the actual acknowledgement section of the poetry book, which itself addresses readers: “Dedicated to whomever’s worn, warm afternoon hands come upon these pages – wherever you may find them – and that you may remembered that the world is conspiring for your and to act in a manner as such.” If the similarity between this section and the last poem is meant to create a sense of closure, or perhaps of loop, it seems more a gimmick than a meaningful decision. If the speaker were to end her collection as it began, it would imply that the transformations she has undergone throughout the collection amount to nothing, which would in turn undermine the impact of preceding poems. Additionally, by dedicating her collection to those with “worn, warm afternoon hands,” she incidentally draws a parallel between her readership and the salamander harassing her. Because her poems are eventually published, the salamander seems to have succeeded in coercing her, with the implication that the speaker never intended to release her works in the first place—this would then contradict her decision not to keep her secrets in deep. The following page features a two-line poem, whose ending line is hand-written tree times with different colored pencils: “You can have a life beyond your wildest dreams / all you have to do is change everything...” (lines 1-2). The pivotal line reads ironic, since, in the context of “Salamander,” it appears that the narrative voice has indeed changed everything. Although she proclaims to be “a real poet” (line 15), this concluding poem does not bring this idea full circle—in true Camp fashion, it leaves readers with more questions than answers.

2.18. haikus / notes for a poet

Despite confessing her disinterest in selling personal stories, the speaker provides readers with an additional set of poems in the subsequent section, introducing ten original haikus. Haikus are a traditional form of Japanese poetry designed to capture a fleeting moment, a simple, yet evocative image. A reflection (if not repetition) of the journey unfolding within the collection, this section revisits the sentiments explored in previous full-length poems. For instance, the first haiku laments that “the burden of fame is real” (line 2), while the third one contemplates the difference between “astronomical twilight” (line 2) and “civil twilight” (line 3), evoking the astrological images of earlier works. Similarly, the eighth haiku revisits the sugary imagery of “SugarFish”: “Babe let’s go to town / buy something sweet – pink grapefruit / eat it with sugar” (lines 1-3). The other haikus mainly deal with unrequited love and heartbreak, such as the fourth one, “Every night I die / when I give myself to you / sad but beautiful” (lines 1-3), or the seventh one, “For years I begged you / to just take me in your arms / you wouldn’t. Couldn’t.” (lines 1-3). This section thus serves as a prime example of Del Rey’s inclination toward repetition, as she essentially reinterprets her poems via another medium.

Most interesting is the concluding section of the collection, entitled “notes for a poet,” which contains a series of lined blank pages, interspersed with reproductions of oil paintings reminiscent of those by Andy Warhol and David Hockney. Whereas the full-length poems trace the speaker’s journey towards becoming a poet, this final section extends an invitation to readers, encouraging them to now take on this role and engage with the empty canvas before them:

It’s debatable if it can be seen as a poem and part of the book but nevertheless it reveals more about the concept of poet Del Rey introduces. By leaving the reader space and marking this space for a poet, the readers themselves is designated a poet. (Tauer 9)

Readers are given the opportunity to write poems on these designated pages, each of which already has its accompanying image. If this section invites readers to actively participate in the creative process, it also implies a certain detachment on the part of the speaker, since she ultimately leaves them with the responsibility of crafting the conclusion to her own collection. This detached attitude, from which she tries to disengage herself throughout her journey, therefore reaches its climax in the final sections of the collection, marking an ambiguously fitting conclusion to Del Rey’s poetic exploration.

3. CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed to analyze Lana Del Rey's poetry collection, *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*, through the lens of Camp, with focus on Del Rey's aesthetic strategies. As the individual analyses of the poems have shown, her work aligns with the sensibilities of Camp, particularly those of naïve Camp, and the not-so-linear journey undertaken by her narrative voice serves as a compelling illustration of this tendency.

The narrative voice, trying to rid herself of her pervasive feelings of doubt, embarks on a journey towards self-assurance. Through her emotionally charged, self-consciously introspective poems, readers bear witness to her transformations, as she simultaneously grows confident as a poet. Although she seems to make significant progress in the first half of the collection, confidently asserting her creative abilities in poems such as "Never to Heaven" or "SportCruiser," she adopts a more detached, if not disinterested attitude as the collection nears its end. As a result, the conclusion Del Rey provides runs counter to everything her poems represent—an (unintentional) rejection of narrative expectations that cements her affinities with Camp.

The poems within *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass* are defined by the contrasts they produce; they juxtapose images that are simultaneously mellow and sinister, innocent and absurd, resulting in a wide array of (contradictory) interpretations. For instance, "In the hills of Benedict Canyon" sets the murder of Sharon Tate in a version of Los Angeles that is both desolate and hauntingly empty, yet a sense of resilience emerges from the very same poem. In a similar vein, "Tessa DiPietro" satirizes her penchant for idealizing Jim Morrison, Del Rey enlisting a real-life celebrity psychic to deliver a string of cryptic ramblings about intuition. Beneath this apparent mockery, however, the poem remains deeply personal, capturing her narrative voice weeping during one particular séance.

Camp, as a defining element of her aesthetic, is evident in the contradictions and ambiguities that her poems elicit. Del Rey wholeheartedly embraces the extremity of her emotions, navigating between extravagance and vulnerability, producing a collection of poems that are alternately wistful, opulent, melancholic, and joyful. Her unapologetic taste for the sentimental, combined with her ability to sprinkle self-indulgent comments and topical, pseudo-American references amid existential contemplations, reflects the multifaceted nature of Camp. Just as Camp revels in the blurring of boundaries, Del Rey blurs the lines between authenticity and artifice, shaping an immersive, albeit confounding reading experience.

Del Rey's poetry is Camp because it simultaneously embraces and subverts expectations. Stubbornly consistent, her imagery weaves together well-worn clichés—

immediate signifiers that conjure up her mythologized version of California—with laughably mundane, nostalgia-drenched references. By placing these seemingly incongruous elements side by side, she gives rise to her distinctive aesthetic; the typewritten manuscripts of her poems, digitally scanned before being printed in the book, along with the inclusion of retro-like photographs, surprisingly devoid of people, further enhance this aesthetic.

Her penchant for repetition and self-referentiality adds another layer of Camp to her poetry. Her re-using specific symbols, such as the sea, wildfires, heaven, violets, or the city of Los Angeles, establishes a sense of continuity in her work, but also enhances its ambiguity. As for her reliance on outside references, she tends to flatten them to fit her own narrative, often simplifying their original meanings to make them resonate with her personal experiences. This allows her to blend the past with the present (and at times the future), which further enhances her retro-futuristic aesthetic.

What counts for DelReyesque Camp is the style in which ideas are held, the sleeve of the poetry book alone being a testament to this fact. In every aspect of her creative expression, Del Rey's dedication to crafting an aesthetic experience is evident. It is also this stylistic approach that makes her collection a striking manifestation of Camp, the visual and emotional impact of the work often taking precedence over its content. If one were to torture this aesthetic long enough, it will confess to anything. Perhaps for this reason does it inspire so much projection from fans, critics, and scholars alike. Still, Del Rey's work remains purely aesthetic-driven, hence uncritical and noncommittal—this is not to say it is bad or shallow, it is just Camp.

Works Cited

- Bernstein, Arielle. "The existential genius of Lana Del Rey: Performing yearning self-destruction as meaningful as Don Draper's — and just as uniquely American." *Salon*, 13 September 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/09/13/the_existential_genius_of_lana_del_rey_performing_yearning_self_destruction_as_meaningful_as_don_drapers_and_just_as_uniquely_american/.
- Bess, Gabby. "Wifey Status." *The New Inquiry*, 11 July 2014, pp. 7–9.
- Black, Hannah. "Full-Time Daughter." *The New Inquiry*, 11 July 2014, pp. 10–12.
- Blackburn, Anton. "Voices That Matter: Authenticity, Identity, and Voice in the Musical Career of Lana Del Rey." *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 84–114.
- Bolton, Andrew. "Introduction: Only Her Hairdresser Knows For Sure." *CAMP – Notes on Fashion*, edited by Andrew Bolton, et al., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019, p. 1.
- Brandle, Lars. "Lana Del Rey Asked the Audience to Help Find Her Vape: Watch." *Billboard*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/ana-del-rey-brazil-lost-vape-1235342317/>.
- Clark, Patrick. "Lana Del Rey to sell forthcoming poetry book for just \$1." *NME*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/ana-del-rey-says-shell-selling-upcoming-poetry-book-1-2458783>.
- Cleto, Fabio. "The Spectacle of Camp." *CAMP – Notes on Fashion*, edited by Andrew Bolton et al., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019, pp. 9–59.
- Crutcher, Paul A. "Lana Del Rey's American Grotesque." *Rock Music Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2019, pp. 237–257.
- Dailey, Hannah. "Lana Del Rey Works a Shift at a Waffle House in Alabama: See the Photos." *Billboard*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/ana-del-rey-works-waffle-house-alabama-photos-1235376235/>.
- Del Rey, Lana. "13 Beaches." *Lust for Life*. Interscope & Polydor, 2017. CD.
- . "A&W." *Did You Know That There's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*. Interscope & Polydor, 2023. CD.
- . "Arcadia." *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD.
- . "Bellevue." *Lanapedia*, [https://lanadelrey.fandom.com/wiki/Bellevue_\(song\)](https://lanadelrey.fandom.com/wiki/Bellevue_(song)).
- . "Black Bathing Suit." *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD
- . "Black Beauty." *Ultraviolence*. Interscope & Polydor, 2014. CD.

- . “Candy Necklace (feat. Jon Batiste).” *Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*. Interscope & Polydor, 2023. CD
- . “Cherry Blossom.” *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD
- . “Cola.” *Born to Die: The Paradise Edition*. Interscope & Polydor, 2012. CD.
- . “Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd.” *Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*. Interscope & Polydor, 2023. CD.
- . “Fingertips.” *Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*. Interscope & Polydor, 2023. CD.
- . “Freak.” *Honeymoon*. Interscope & Polydor, 2015. CD.
- . “Heroin.” *Lust for Life*. Interscope & Polydor, 2017. CD.
- . “Lana Del Rey Breaks Down Venice Bitch For Zane Lowe’s World Record Sept 2018.” Interview by Zane Lowe. *Youtube*, uploaded by Lana Del Rey Interviews & Archive (Fan Page), 18 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yAZ2FtWRNw>.
- . “Lana Del Rey - Entrevista Legendada para a TV Italiana (2012).” Interview by Massive Arts. *Youtube*, uploaded by Lana Del Rey Addiction, 28 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alJqRB9V2ZY>.
- . “Lana Del Rey: ‘I got jolted into the real world.’” Interview by Mark Savage, *BBC*, 26 July 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-40714557>.
- . “Lana Del Rey On World Café.” Interview by Talia Schlanger, *World Café*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/world-cafe/2018/02/16/586059115/lana-del-rey-on-world-cafe>.
- . “Lana Del Rey: She Does It For The Girls.” Interview by Hannah Ewens, *Rolling Stone UK*, April/May 2023, pp. 48–63.
- . “Lana Del Rey Talks Next Music Video & Tour w/ Kali Uchis & Jhené Aiko.” Interview by Gaby Wilson. *YouTube*, uploaded by MTV News, 31 October 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTUk2AOuZhM>.
- . “Lana Del Rey Unfiltered.” Interview by Alessandro Michele. *W Magazine*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.wmagazine.com/life/lana-del-rey-new-album-music-interview-2022>.
- . “Music to Watch Boys To.” *Honeymoon*. Interscope & Polydor, 2015. CD.
- . “Nectar of the Gods.” *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD.
- . “Norman Fucking Rockwell.” *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*. Interscope & Polydor, 2019. CD.
- . “Old Money.” *Ultraviolence*. Interscope & Polydor, 2014. CD.

- . "Patent Leather Do-Over." *Lanapedia*,
[https://lanadelrey.fandom.com/wiki/Patent_Leather_Do-Over_\(poem\)](https://lanadelrey.fandom.com/wiki/Patent_Leather_Do-Over_(poem))
- . "Shades of Cool." *Ultraviolence*. Interscope & Polydor, 2014. CD.
- . "Sweet Carolina." *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD.
- . "Tomorrow Never Came (feat. Sean Ono Lennon)." *Lust for Life*. Interscope & Polydor, 2017. CD.
- . "Ultraviolence." *Ultraviolence*. Interscope & Polydor, 2014. CD.
- . "Venice Bitch." *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*. Interscope & Polydor, 2019. CD.
- . "Violets for Roses." *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD.
- . *Violet Bent Backwards over the Grass*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- . "Wildflower Wildfire." *Blue Banisters*. Interscope & Polydor, 2021. CD.
- Dyer, Richard. "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going." *The Body Politic*, 1977, pp. 11–13.
- Eco, Umberto. "'Casablanca': Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." *SubStance*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1985, pp. 3–12.
- Fetveit, Arild. "Death, Beauty, and Iconoclastic Nostalgia: Precarious Aesthetics and Lana Del Rey." *European Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 187–207.
- Flinn, Caryl. "The Deaths of Camp." *Camera Obscura Feminism Culture and Media Studies*, vol. 1, no. 35, 1995, pp. 53–84.
- Fortescue, Helen. "Norman Fucking Rockwell! and Lana Del Rey's Layers of Nostalgia." *The Oxford Student*, 8 November 2019,
<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/11/08/norman-fucking-rockwell-and-lana-del-reys-layers-of-nostalgia/>.
- Fowles, Stacey M. "Die 4 U." *The New Inquiry*, 11 July 2014, pp. 21–23.
- Gannon, Madeleine V. "American dreaming in Lana Del Rey's 'Norman Fucking Rockwell!'" *The Michigan Daily*, 8 September 2019,
<https://www.michigandaily.com/music/american-dreaming-in-lana-del-reys-norman-fucking-rockwell/>.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "America." *Selected Poems 1947-1995*. HarperCollins, 2001, pp. 6–10.
- Hahn, Torsten, and Ronald Röttel. "Lana Del Rey: Authentische Zitat-Oberflächen." *POP*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2021, pp. 156–170.
- Harris, Mark. "Checkout Time at the Asylum." *New York Magazine*, 14 November 2008,
<https://nymag.com/news/features/52176/>.
- Heaf, Jonathan. "Lana Del Rey: 'I never wanted to lead a normal life.'" *British GQ*, 1 October 2012, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/woman-of-the-year-lana-del-rey>.

- Henley, William E. "Invictus." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*. W.W Norton, 2000, pp. 706.
- Hilton, Alexandra. "Building Histories, The Bellevue Psychopathic Hospital and the Rivington Street Bath." *NYC Department of Records & Information Services*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2021/4/16/building-histories-the-bellevue-psychopathic-hospital-and-the-rivington-street-bath>.
- Jarman-Ivens, Freya. "Notes on Musical Camp." *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, edited by Derek B. Scott, 2009, pp. 188–205.
- Joannou, Cliff. "In Praise of America's songbird." *Rolling Stone UK*, April/May 2023, p. 12.
- Kleinhans, Chuck. "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Irony." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Meyer, Routledge, 1994, pp. 182–201.
- Long, Scott. "Useful Laughter: Camp and Seriousness." *Southwest Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1989, pp. 53–70.
- Lowder, Bryan J. "Madonna fell, and I was there to catch her." *Slate*, 11 April 2013, https://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2013/postcards_from_camp/madonna_at_the_super_bowl_when_she_fell_camp_was_there_to_catch_her.html.
- Madden, Emma. "The genius kitsch of Lana Del Rey." *Dazed*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/42856/1/lana-del-rey-hope-is-a-dangerous-thing-kitsch-literary-references>.
- Meehan, Thomas. "Not Good Taste, Not Bad taste, It's Camp." *New York Times Magazine*, 21 March 1965, pp. 30–31, 113–115.
- Molotkow, Alexandra. "Lana Del Rey and the fantasy of surrender." *The Globe and Mail*, 20 June 2014, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/lana-del-rey-and-the-fantasy-of-surrender/article19258876/>.
- Morrison, Scott, and Maria Sledmere. "The Poetry of Lana Del Rey, by Scott Morrison and Maria Sledmere." *SPAM zine & Press*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.spamzine.co.uk/post/feature-the-poetry-of-lana-del-rey-by-scott-morrison-and-maria-sledmere>.
- Pope, Alexander. "Eloisa to Abelard." *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 138–146.
- Powers, Ann. "Lana Del Rey Lives In America's Messy Subconscious." *NPR*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757545360/lana-del-rey-lives-in-americas-messy-subconscious>.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Daddy." *Ariel*, Faber and Faber, 1972, pp. 54–56.

- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber, 2019.
- Rivieccio, Genna. “Good Christian Bad Girls: Britney Spears and Lana Del Rey.” *PopMatters*, 15 October 2015, <https://www.popmatters.com/good-christian-bad-girls-britney-spears-and-lana-del-rey-2495483164.html>.
- Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Duke University Press, 1996.
- Shaviro, Steven. “Lana Del Rey, ‘Shades of Cool’ (Jake Nava 2014). *Digital Music Videos*, edited by Steven Shaviro, Rutgers University Press, 2017, pp. 38–50.
- Siddiqi, Ayesha A. “Ms. America.” *The New Inquiry*, 11 July 2014, pp. 3–4.
- Simmons, William J. “Love Song: On Lana Del Rey’s Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass.” *Flash Art*, 24 February 2021, <https://flash---art.com/article/love-song-on-lana-del-reys-violet-bent-backwards-over-the-grass/>.
- Sledmere, Maria. “Nostalgia for the Future: Lana Del Rey’s ‘Love’ and the Cultural Politics of Celestial Hauntology and Queer Temporality.” *Mariaology*, 3 April 2017, <https://mariaology.co.uk/2017/04/03/2307/>.
- Sontag, Susan. “Notes on Camp.” *Partisan Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1964, pp. 515–530.
- Tauer, Moritz. *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass: Connecting Elements in Lana Del Rey’s Poetry*. 2014. University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Thesis.
- Tavana, Art. “Lana Del Rey: In Praise of a Difficult Woman.” *Medium*, 22 June 2020, <https://medium.com/arc-digital/lana-del-rey-in-praise-of-a-difficult-woman-18aae45f9030>.
- Torres, Sasha. “The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the Batman Television Series.” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 330–343.
- Van de Port, Mattijs. “Genuinely Made up: Camp, Baroque, and Other Denaturalizing Aesthetics in the Cultural Production of the Real.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2012, pp. 864–883.
- Vasak, Mallika. “Lana Del Rey and her Affinity for the American Aesthetic.” *Medium*, 19 November 2020, <https://medium.com/illumination/lana-del-rey-and-her-affinity-for-the-american-aesthetic-4ca55de7b7f2>.
- Walters, Barry. “Darkness Comes Alive: The Paradox Of Lana Del Rey.” *NPR*, 20 June 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2014/06/20/323943849/darkness-comes-alive-the-paradox-of-lana-del-rey>.

Wolk, Magdalena. *Fourth wave feminism through Lana Del Rey*. 2021. Malmö University,
Master Thesis.