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Flawlessly Negotiating Femininity: Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj, and Pop Feminism

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# Flawlessly Negotiating Femininity: Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj, and Pop Feminism

By

Chelsea Lauren Mize
B.A., Vanderbilt University, 2013

Advisor: Tanine Allison, Ph.D.

An abstract of
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Abstract

Flawlessly Negotiating Femininity: Beyoncé Knowles, Nicki Minaj, and Pop Feminism

By Chelsea Mize

The music video can be a rich site for representations of femininity that can be read and consumed in counter-hegemonic ways. This thesis attempts to investigate how the relationship between popular culture and feminism is negotiated through the music videos and cultural products of pop artists Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj. The foremost concern of my project is how the intersection of feminism and popular culture creates a space in which many female pop artists are utilizing their feminine agency and identity to explore how gender, sexuality, and race are constructed and visually coded through their audiovisual products.

In my first chapter, I will discuss Beyoncé Knowles and how she implements alter egos and female masquerade to explore notions of feminine agency, naturalizing inauthenticity along the way. In the second chapter, I will discuss the hip-hop/pop artist, Nicki Minaj, and examine the ways in which she utilizes alter egos and performative artifice to challenge the race and gender stereotypes constructed and inscribed upon her body. Minaj employs a performance style that is eccentric and artificial to the point of excess; through her gender-bending alter egos and ambiguous displays of sexuality, Nicki Minaj, as Uri McMillan notes, demonstrates a "quirky blend of artifice and alterity [that] ultimately rebukes hip hop's obsession with authenticity."[1] The concluding chapter of my thesis seeks to question how these music videos are received and consumed. I examine their potential for subversion and look at the ways in which the products of these pop culture icons can be consumed in counter-hegemonic ways that challenge the status quo.

[1] Uri McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics: The Camp Performance of Nicki Minaj," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 80, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2014.901600.

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# Introduction

## Pop Feminism: How Pop Culture Became a Feminist Issue

Pop. Culture. Say the words out loud. Let the syllables resonate on your tongue; taste the connotations that swirl on your palate. Now let's do some word association. What comes to mind when you hear the words "pop culture"? Probably words like "low brow" or "commodity culture," notions of "entertainment for the masses," perhaps phrases like "guilty pleasure." The overwhelming opinion seems to be that popular culture does not merit serious thought or study, that the products aimed at the masses are devoid of value because they are created with the intent to sell. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, popular culture matters, if for no other reason than for the very fact that it *is* popular. Whether we consider our reality TV binge watching sessions a "guilty pleasure" or own it for what it is, most of us, if not all—to a certain extent—partake in and enjoy popular culture. More importantly, as I intend to demonstrate through my discussion of pop artists Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj, we all can learn from pop culture. We can learn about identity and what it means to be a woman; we can see social and political activism within the public arena.

Films, television shows, popular music, celebrity culture—these are all products of our society and culture, and they tell us things about ourselves if we are only willing to look. Popular culture evolves and changes as we do as a society; the ebb and flow of what is popular is as malleable as our own wants and desires. Popular forms and practices may reinforce certain stereotypes and problematic ideals, but they also contain the possibility

for resistance, for thinly veiled opposition that is only hidden by the fact that it is so out in the open. Feminism is one such example, demonstrative of popular culture's ability to absorb and transform complex topics and make them accessible to a larger audience.

In their collection of essays entitled *Feminism in Popular Culture*, editors Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley begin by stressing the importance of *"in."* Feminism *in* popular culture versus feminism *and* popular culture. The difference is small but speaks volumes. Feminism *and* popular culture presupposes that there is a 'real' and 'authentic' feminism that exists outside of popular culture that "offers a position from which to judge and measure feminism's success or failure in making it into the mainstream."[2] As Hollows and Moseley note, this approach assumes that feminism can teach us things about popular culture but does not examine the opposite, disregarding what popular culture can tell us about feminism.

Though undercurrents of feminism have always existed within popular culture, in the past few years, feminism has truly become a prevalent source of debate in pop culture. Whispers of "third-wave feminism" or "post-feminism" have made their way into discussions of popular culture and it is clear that this newest iteration of feminism that manifests itself in pop music and mainstream entertainment is asking to be clarified and examined as the prevalence of feminism *in* popular culture becomes more abundant.

Before I delve into my exploration of feminism in popular culture through case studies of the 'Queen of Pop,'[3] Beyoncé Knowles, and the 'Queen of Rap,'[4] Nicki Minaj,

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2 Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, Feminism in Popular Culture (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 1.
3 Alan McGee, "McGee on Music: Move over Madonna, Beyoncé Is the New Queen of Pop," The Guardian, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2010/mar/03/madonna-beyonce.

it is essential to first get down to the feminist nitty-gritty and situate this point in history within the larger timeline of feminist thought, as well as consider how the unlikely marriage of pop culture and feminism has created a space for non-white and queer voices to be heard as they question the heternormative, raced depictions of femininity that are so pervasive in popular culture.

## Third-Wave Feminism: A Brief Overview

Despite the enduring characterization of second-wave feminism as hostile towards popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s, most people during this period of time were first introduced to feminism via popular culture and representation, coming to understand feminism through popular media rather than through overt involvement in feminist movements.[5]

In the post-second wave period, whether theorists and critics called it postfeminism, popular feminism, or third-wave feminism, notions of the need for a new understanding of the relationship between feminism and the popular became more readily apparent. Whereas second-wave feminists placed themselves 'outside' of popular culture, third-wave feminists began to embrace popular culture as an integral arbiter of feminist progress. The third-wave, "[t]hrough its celebratory and critical engagement with consumer culture…attempts to navigate the fact that there are few alternatives for the

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4 "Nicki Minaj to Host MTV European Music Awards 20th Anniversary Gig," Mail Online, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2775953/Reigning-Queen-Of-Rap-Nicki-Minaj-takes-place-throne-announces-ll-host-MTV-European-Music-Awards-20th-anniversary-celebrations.html.
5 Hollows and Moseley, Feminism in Popular Culture, 2.

construction of subjectivity outside the production/consumption cycle of global commodification."[6]

As I have quickly learned throughout the process of writing this thesis, feminism is always complex and contradictory and often privileges certain voices and groups over others—and, to make things worse, the delineation between what is 'feminist' and what isn't—and who is feminist and who isn't—is never clear. One of the goals of third-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s, was to strive for a more inclusive approach to feminist ideology that sought out a more fluid conception of feminism which embraced the incongruities and contradictions that feminists had been arguing over for decades.

Rebecca Walker was influential in coining the term 'third-wave feminism' in her 1992 essay, "Becoming the Third Wave." In her landmark piece, Walker wrote to her fellow women:

> I am ready to decide, as my mother decided before me, to devote much of my energy to the history, health, and healing of women. Each of my choices will have to hold to my feminist standard of justice. To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them… I write this as a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation… Let [the] dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave.[7]

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6 Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, "'It's All about the Benjamins': Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States," in Third Wave Feminism: Expanded, Second Edition, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
7 Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," Ms. Magazine, 1992, 40–41.

Walker's body of work helped establish third-wave feminism as one which focuses on inclusivity, placing emphasis on women's issues in queer and non-white communities.

Long gone were the ideas that a woman who did not actively embody every element of feminist beliefs was just playing at being a feminist and wasn't actually doing anything progressive for her gender. Feminism, with its contradictory definitions and, at times, oppositional, schools of thought, is not straightforward and neither is the active pursuit of being a living, breathing feminist woman. As Amber Kinser notes, part of the significance of the third-wave of feminism is that it can teach us "to live more comfortably with the ambiguity and contradiction" and accept that "complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movements as a whole."[8]

My intention here is not to provide a thorough history of feminism or detail all of the key voices and arguments of the third wave—that would be a monumental task that my page limit and lack of expertise would not allow. However, it is necessary to touch upon some of the main characteristics of third-wave feminism before delving into the questions that I seek to explore. I have already touched on some of the key foci of the third wave, namely the push for making feminism accessible to everyone through the lens of popular culture, as well as the need to celebrate contradictions and complex iterations of femininity.

There are a few more characteristics of the third wave that will be crucial to my argument. First is the inclusion and celebration of women who had typically been

8 Amber Kinser, "Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism," NWSA Journal 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 139.

excluded from prior waves of feminism. bell hooks pushed for a multidimensional, intersectional feminism which did not silence the voices of women of color, as was often the case in academic settings. hooks noted how, for black women, "…true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such it represents a threat."[9] hooks also stressed the need to resist the anti-intellectual stigma among the masses, which caused the voices of minorities who were able to succeed in academia to be shunned by their communities. hooks implored feminists to work towards bridging the education gap to relate to those on the lower spectrum of the economic sphere and attempt to remove the stigma that feminism is for rich, white women only.

Another important facet of the third wave is the freedom for women to make their own choices, choices they didn't necessarily have the freedom to make in the past. Actress and comedienne Aisha Tyler, in her book, *Swerve: Reckless Observations of a Postmodern Girl*, provides a poignant example of the importance of women's choice: "Because, honestly, why did all those other generations go through all that marching and demonstrating and Kombucha tea drinking if not so that we can get what we want and have a kick-ass time doing it?"[10] This newfound feminist freedom of the third wave encourages its members to reclaim 'all things girly,' with many young feminist now exercising their right to dress and behave in a traditionally gendered manner if they so desire without feeling like they have compromised their feminist beliefs.

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9 bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, 1st edition (Toronto, Ont., Canada: Between the Lines, 1989), 8.
10 Aisha Tyler, Swerve: Reckless Observations of a Postmodern Girl, First Edition (New York: Dutton Adult, 2004), 3.

Third wave feminism is also decidedly pro-sex, arguing vehemently against the policing of desire and stressing the importance of sex "as a site of pleasure rather than political analysis."[11] Additionally, many third-wave feminists commend using female sexuality as a source of power. In "Writings of the Third Wave: Young Feminists in Conversation," Jennifer Gilley and Diane Zabel contest that many third-wavers would argue that, "if dancing on a pole helps improve your body image because men are whistling at you, it can be empowering. Or if wearing a low-cut shirt helps you win an argument, so be it."[12]

The sexual freedom celebrated by third-wavers goes beyond heteronormative depictions of sexuality, creating a space for the LGBT community within feminist circles. The third wave's refusal to adhere to strict categories has opened the door for gender bending and the inclusion of transsexuals and transgendered people. As Gilley and Zabel point out:

> Postmodern feminism has deconstructed the category of 'woman' to the point where it can barely be said to exist. There are so many points of difference between individual women that it can only rightly be used as a point for constructing alliances rather than cementing a sisterhood of common experience.[13]

What does it mean to be a woman? The answer to that question varies greatly for each individual woman and the third wave forgoes rigid definitions of womanhood in favor of a fluid, inclusive approach to gender and sex.

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11 Jennifer Gilley and Diane Zabel, "Writings of the Third Wave: Young Feminists in Conversation," Reference & User Services Quarterly 44, no. 3 (March 2005): 190.
12 The use of female sexuality as a tool is controversial and not all third-wavers would agree with this statement, however, in the spirit of the third wave's acceptance of contradiction, the fact that this is a controversial topic does not invalidate its importance. Ibid.
13 Ibid., 190–191.

As Judith Butler argues, biological sex is subsumed by the social constructions of gender. According to Butler, "I think for a woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect. I don't think that it's a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that 'coherent identification' has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame."[14] Third-wave feminism is not about defining who is a woman and who is not, rather, it is about creating an alliance amongst all who proclaim themselves to be women.

The last facet of third-wave feminism that I would like to touch upon is essential to the argument that is to come in later pages. A hallmark of the third wave of feminism, as I briefly mentioned above, is its eagerness to engage with popular culture. Despite the constructed nature of media representations of femininity, these representations have a marked impact upon the culture that consumes these images. The third wave, more so than the feminist waves that preceded it, is concerned with publishing in popular formats and venues "so as to be a part of the culture they critique."[15] Furthermore, the third wave recognizes the limitations of academic feminism and desires to expand the scope of feminism by taking advantage of contemporary media and technology.

Though popular culture is often written off as meaningless, mass produced drivel made to foster a capitalist agenda, as many third-wave feminists demonstrate, the practice of deconstructing and analyzing depictions of women and feminism in popular culture has become a common form of feminist activism. Whether people choose to accept it or

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14 Judith Butler, The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler, Artforum International (31), November 3, 1992.
15 Gilley and Zabel, "Writings of the Third Wave: Young Feminists in Conversation," 191.

not, pop culture matters, and the representations of femininity it feeds to women, young women especially, are not to be taken lightly.

## Feminism Takes on Pop Culture

With the third wave, feminism found an unlikely platform in popular culture. I am particularly interested in examining the increased prominence of feminist discourse both embedded within popular media products and explicitly voiced by iconic pop culture figures like Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj who are actively redefining concepts of femininity and female sexuality.[16] Though strains of feminist discourse have never been completely absent from popular culture, feminism has truly come into the spotlight of pop culture in the past few years. 2013 and 2014, in particular, featured prominent moments of feminist victories that were made possible explicitly through popular culture. Alice Vincent, writing for the British publication, *The Telegraph*, proclaimed that in 2014, "culture became a feminist issue," noting that, "[o]n the red carpet, on stage, in our National Theatre and our Houses of Parliament, at the UN, on our bookshelves, Twitter feeds and on talk shows, prominent actresses, singers and writers proclaimed the importance of gender equality."[17]

Indeed, the past few years has provided us with many instances of women in the public eye loudly resisting gender inequality and emphasizing the importance of embracing feminism, and not just in the political sphere. At the 2014 Academy Awards, in her acceptance speech for Best Actress, Cate Blanchett lambasted "those… in the

16 I will also bring Lady Gaga into discussion at times in discussions of her collaborative work with Beyoncé.
17 Alice Vincent, "How Feminism Conquered Pop Culture," Telegraph, December 30, 2014, sec. Culture, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11310119/feminism-pop-culture-2014.html.

industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the center are niche experiences."[18] Patricia Arquette, the 2015 recipient of the Oscar for Best Actress, similarly championed women's rights, stating: "To every woman who gave birth, to every taxpayer and citizen of this nation, we have fought for everybody else's equal rights, it's our time to have wage equality once and for all, and equal rights for women in the United States of America."[19]

Also in 2014, British actress Emma Watson of *Harry Potter* fame was appointed as a U.N. Women Goodwill Ambassador. In September 2014, Watson delivered a speech at the U.N. to promote the launch of her HeForShe initiative, which aims to encourage men and boys everywhere to "take up the mantle" of ending gender inequality and become advocates for feminist initiatives. Watson spoke about the negative connotations associated with the word 'feminist,' noting that "fighting for women's rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating… my recent research has shown me that feminism has become an unpopular word. Women are choosing not to identify as feminists. Apparently, I'm among the ranks of women whose expressions are seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, and anti-men. Unattractive, even." Watson continued by addressing the gender inequality that men also face, noting how:

> Men don't have the benefits of equality, either…We don't often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes, but I can see that they are, and that when they are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence. If men don't have to be aggressive in order to be accepted, women won't feel compelled to be submissive. If men don't have to

18 Jenn Selby, "Cate Blanchett's Best Actress Oscars 2014 Acceptance Speech," The Independent, accessed March 14, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/oscars-2014-cate-blanchetts-best-actress-acceptance-speech-in-full-9164895.html.
19 "Transcript Of Patricia Arquette's Oscar Acceptance Speech Shows Her Passionate Words About Gender Inequality — VIDEO," accessed March 14, 2015, http://www.bustle.com/articles/65843-transcript-of-patricia-arquettes-oscar-acceptance-speech-shows-her-passionate-words-about-gender-inequality-video.

> control, women won't have to be controlled. Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong. It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals. If we stop defining each other by what we are not, and start defining ourselves by who we are, we can all be freer...[20]

Watson's speech was a notable moment that melded the popular and the political, demonstrating the power of pop culture and mass media to affect change. In her speech, Watson even addressed her own insecurities about being a feminist leader when she's merely an actress, confessing that she told herself in moments of doubt, "If not me, who? If not now, when?"[21]

One thing you will find in common about the three examples above is that they are all white women who are coming forwards for gender equality, white women who are addressing 'the feminist issue' without noting that feminism and gender equality is always inherently an issue about race and sexuality as well. The most problematic of the examples above is that of Patricia Arquette, whose speech separated the women's movement distinctly from gay and civil rights movements and "overlooked women at the intersection of multiple minority groups."[22] This brings up one of the main problems that still plagues third-wave feminism, one which, I would argue, is being taken up in its own way in another area of popular culture: music.

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20 Nicki Lisa Cole, "Full Transcript of Emma Watson's Speech on Gender Equality at the UN," About.com Education, accessed March 14, 2015, http://sociology.about.com/od/Current-Events-in-Sociological-Context/fl/Full-Transcript-of-Emma-Watsons-Speech-on-Gender-Equality-at-the-UN.htm.
21 Ibid.
22 Erin C. Cassese, Tiffany D. Barnes and Regina P. Branton, "What Patricia Arquette Got Wrong at the Oscars," The Washington Post, February 25, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/25/what-patricia-arquette-got-wrong-at-the-oscars/.

**Intersectional Feminism and The Promise of Hip-Hop**

Though one of the crucial components of third-wave feminism is an emphasis on intersectionality, which encourages feminists to consider gender's relation to race, class, and sex, the third wave has struggled to transform the concept of intersectional feminism from theory into practice. Unfortunately, third-wave feminism often demonstrates a tendency to privilege white, heteronormative ideologies. As Amber Kinser notes:

> Women of color still struggle to have race-related subjectivities occupy prominent feminist space, though they may have met with more success in the third-wave era than in previous ones. Even so, when an attractive, upper-class white woman argues that it is *feminism* that has made women into victims and men into villains and uses the 'third-wave' label, she is attributed as having facilitated this next evolutionary cycle of feminism.[23]

As far as feminism has come, it still excludes and marginalizes, still hierarchizes and silences.

However, the past few years have also given us inspirational women like Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj who are helping to redefine contemporary feminism as a space for women of color and women who eschew heteronoromative definitions of female sexuality. As surprising as it may seem, given hip-hop culture's history of sexism and objectification of women, hip-hop has arisen as a new domain for feminist discourse. In fact, as Gilley and Zabel point out, many young African American feminists identify as 'hip-hop feminists' rather than third wave feminists.[24]

Patricia Hill Collins similarly identifies a new mobilization of feminism that developed alongside the hip-hop generation, a mobilization of feminism with a renewed

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23 Kinser, "Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism," 130–131.
24 Gilley and Zabel, "Writings of the Third Wave: Young Feminists in Conversation," 191.

focus on the idea that "the personal is political."[25] Collins argues that hip-hop culture is able to reach more women than the "relatively small number of women of color who manage to find women's studies classrooms within colleges and universities," pointing out that for many men and women alike, "mass media has become their classroom."[26]

Since hip-hop's inception in the 1970s in the Bronx in New York, women have been an integral part of shaping the culture known as hip-hop. However, as rap has become the highest-grossing genre of music in the industry, female achievement has often been overlooked and dismissed in favor of an "obsession with wealth and glamour and unadulterated objectification of women" because, from an economic standpoint, the large corporations backing the most notorious rap labels in the business know that, unfortunately for women, "sex and violence are seen as quick sells, so record industry executives pump money into artists with the rawest lyrics, including extreme sexism and virulent homophobia."[27]

Women like Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé Knowles, who have achieved global recognition and monumental success, are impressive and empowering in their own right. To succeed as black women in a notoriously sexist industry, to be at the top of the charts in that industry, and to sing explicit messages of female empowerment and feminist anthems is all the more impressive. They have answered the call to arms proclaimed by Patricia Hill Collins for "[t]those Black women who have managed to develop a feminist analysis" to "recognize the need to use the art form of rap as a forum to reach young

25 Collins, From Black Power to Hip Hop, 162.
26 Ibid., 191.
27 Katherine Cheairs, "Women, Feminism, & Hip Hop," Freedom Socialist, December 2005.

women who have no other means of finding feminism."[28] Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé have become figureheads for feminism in pop and hip-hop music, challenging the status quo and forging a new path for all women, regardless of race or sexuality, who follow in their footsteps.

## Music Videos: From Sexist to Subversive

I have long been an avid fan of music videos. I wasn't allowed to watch MTV as a child (because of the sexual, inappropriate nature of the video) but I have distinct memories of watching MTV in secret with my best friend. We'd watch our music video programming with paranoia, waiting until we heard my mother's footsteps approaching, only to change the TV back to Nickelodeon or an acceptable channel for our age. I remember trying to learn the choreography to Christina Aguilera's "Genie In A Bottle" music video at my best friend's 12th birthday party. I also remember the bafflement with which my friends and I watched the music video for "Baby Got Back" upon its release. Now I watch music videos to procrastinate or when I'm getting ready for a night out with friends. The women I have grown up watching in music videos have not always been positive images of women. I look back on the rap videos I watched in high school and cringe at the objectification of my gender, realizing in retrospect why my mother tried to guard me so fervently from those depictions of femininity.

The music video is notorious for its overt sexism (and racism), with the stereotype of the 'video vixen' being all too familiar. As Diane Railton and Paul Watson argue in *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*:

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28 Collins, From Black Power to Hip Hop, 192.

> …patterns of raced imagery that emerged from, and were consolidated in, Victorian discourses of colonialism and imperialism and which functioned historically to uphold and legitimate white privilege, continue to inform the very different ways in which black people and white people are represented in contemporary popular culture generally and music videos in particular.[29]

The music video, by denying the individuality of the women, allows the male performers to see women, particularly black women, as sexual objects without being *seen* by the women. The women are stripped of their right to look, mimicking the policing of the gaze that has permeated racial politics throughout our colonial history. Jean-Paul Sartre compared the gaze to looking through a peephole and seeing without being seen. For Sartre, through the subject's non-recognition, the recipient of the gaze is reduced to an object. When the gaze is returned, the subject/object relationship is upset.[30]

In *Reel to Real*, bell hooks championed the idea of looking back in an "oppositional gaze," stating that the process of looking is an act of defiance, a statement that says "[n]ot only will I stare, I want my look to change reality." Hooks addresses her experience engaging with mainstream media, stating that to engage in film (and, I would argue, in a music video), is to engage in the negation of black female representation in the media. hooks claims that "[r]epresentation is the 'hot issue' right now because it's a major realm of power for any system of domination. We keep coming back to the question of representation because identity is always about representation."[31]

Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé, following in the footsteps of women like Madonna and Missy Elliot, are taking the music video and the issue of female representation to task.

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29 Diane Railton and Paul Watson, Music Video and the Politics of Representation (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 88.
30 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness (Open Road Media, 2012).
31 bell hooks, Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies (Routledge, 2012), 221.

They are looking back, they are "*acknowledging* and *confronting* [their] objectification" and moving towards empowering women as subjects or agents of their sexuality."[32] I became interested in this issue, in this idea of the music video as a space for subversive representations of femininity, because I started to notice a trend of women splitting themselves down the middle through performativity and artifice, of taking on alter egos and playing with their sexuality and providing me with representations of women that eschewed heteronormativity and demonstrated decisively feminist points of view.

Whether or not you embrace the music video for its potential cultural power, the music video is a popular form and if a feminist message is disseminated through it, people will hear that message whether they realize its subversive potential or not. Through roleplaying and gender and sexual performance, these women are taking charge of their representations and challenging the sex, gender, and racial stereotypes that have been constructed and figuratively inscribed on women's bodies. Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj both utilize feminine masquerade and performativity to achieve additional agency in their respective careers. Nicki Minaj has used girly artifice and roleplaying as a way to gain agency in an industry that is dominated by men; she has reappropriated her sexual objectification and turned it into a source of empowerment. Beyoncé has used alter egos and performativity to prove that women can 'have it all,' that women can be a sexy popstar and a business mogul and a beauty icon and a wife and a mother, all at the same time.

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32 Derrick Darby, Tommie Shelby, and William Irwin, Hip-Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason (Open Court, 2013), 99.

Through their negotiation of their representations as females, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj are putting forth a new brand of feminism, one which deconstructs gender roles by embracing the artifice that is at the heart of gender stereotypes. Judith Butler argues that the ideas and ideals of gender are created and maintained through repetitive gender performance.[33] For Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, the music video is a space where they can actively resist negative interpretations of femininity and even push the boundaries of what femininity allows, creating new ideals through their performances of femininity.

Furthermore, pop feminists like Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé are working to remove the negative connotations associated with the 'pop' in pop culture and reappropriating it to further a feminist discourse—pop feminism, a strain of feminism which is inclusive, accessible by all, and reaches a global audience. It creates a space for women of color and LGBT women to take control of how they are represented in the media. It might not be earth shattering, it might be contradictory, but to a certain extent, isn't that the point of third-wave feminism? Isn't the point to push boundaries and rifle feathers in the name of feminist activism, even if not everyone is happy with your specific definition of feminism?

Pop feminism does just that. It embraces the flaws and complexities that encapsulate what it means to be a woman; it is tailored to our unique era that is centered around social media and 'viral' sources of entertainment. Judith Butler once said that "…it seems to me that there is no easy way to know whether something is subversive. Subversiveness is not something that can be gauged or calculated… I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its

33 Ibid., 103.

conventions."[34] These women might not be wholly subversive but their active attempts to achieve increased feminine agency through performativity and fluid representations of race, gender, and sex—coupled with the sheer magnitude and spectacle of their careers—suggests that, whether or not they are fully subverting heterosexual hegeomony, they are taking a step in the right direction, a step towards a feminism that is accessible to all and privileges a truly diverse range of voices.

34 Butler, The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler.

# Chapter 1

## Beyoncé Knowles: Queen of Pop Culture and Pop Feminism

Beyoncé Knowles has been in the public eye for nearly two decades. She is a mainstay in popular culture, a household name, a member of the elite group of pop icons with first-name-only status *à la* Madonna and Cher.[35] Beyoncé is one of the best-selling musical artists of all time, weighing in with a staggering 118 million records sold as a solo artist (on top of her 60 million records sold with Destiny's Child) and 17 Grammys.[36]

In her 18 years (and counting) in the spotlight, she has evolved into an incredibly influential public figure, not just as a musician but also as a woman and champion of feminism and gender equality. *Time* magazine listed her as one of the 100 most influential people in 2013 and 2014.[37] Beyoncé also topped the *Forbes'* "Celebrity 100" list in 2014[38] and became the highest-paid black musician in history.[39]

At first glance, Beyoncé Knowles is an odd person to become a key figure in any type of feminist movement. However, upon closer inspection, she proves to be a

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35 Beyoncé has become such a recognizable name that Microsoft Word even underlines Beyoncé as misspelled and suggests "Beyoncé" as the correct spelling.
36 Beyoncé is also the most nominated female artist in the history of the Grammys. Denise Evans, "Gig Guide: Beyoncé at Manchester Arena," News, Manchester Evening News, (April 26, 2013), https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zVBR4qZf1jIM.kHawt2AQu3s0.
37 Sheryl Sandberg, "The World's 100 Most Influential People: Beyoncé," Time, April 23, 2014, http://time.com/collection/2014-time-100/.
38 Dorothy Pomerantz, "Beyoncé Knowles Tops The FORBES Celebrity 100 List," Forbes, June 30, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2014/06/30/beyonce-knowles-tops-the-forbes-celebrity-100-list/.
39 "Beyoncé Named Highest-Earning Black Artist Of All Time," Entertainment and News, MTV UK, (April 29, 2014), http://www.mtv.co.uk/beyonce/news/beyonce-named-highestearning-black-artist-of-all-time.

revolutionary arbiter of feminist thought in contemporary pop culture and, despite — or perhaps, *because* of — her contradictions and complexities which always have feminist critics up-in-arms, Beyoncé is a worthy vessel through which to bring feminist thought into greater circulation in popular discourse. Despite initial hesitance in accepting the "feminist" label, as her career has evolved, Beyoncé has grown to wear the feminist badge proudly. On her 2013 self-titled album, *Beyoncé,*[40] she boldly flaunts a feminist philosophy and, in the post-*Beyoncé* period, she has become one of the most important figures of pop feminism.

**Beyoncé Sparks Feminist Debate in Popular Discourse**

At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards on August 25, 2014, Beyoncé was awarded the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award[41] and closed out the show with a powerhouse performance that consisted of a medley of 12 tracks from her latest album, *Beyoncé*. Towards the end of the performance, Beyoncé performed her explosive track, "***Flawless (feat. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." The song includes a spoken bridge by Nigerian writer and feminist, Adichie, in the middle of the track.[42]

Beyoncé opened her performance of "***Flawless" with an excerpt from Adichie's speech, taking an aggressive stance in front of the giant screen behind her as it screamed in capital letters, one word at a time:

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40 Beyoncé Knowles, Beyoncé, Studio Album (Parkwood, Columbia, 2013).
41 Nadeska Alexis, "Beyoncé's 2014 VMA Performance: Fearless, Feminist, Flawless, Family Time," News, MTV News, (August 25, 2014), http://www.mtv.com/news/1910270/beyonce-2014-vma-perfomance/.
42 The full speech by Adichie included on "***Flawless", which was taken from her TEDxEuston talk titled "We should all be feminists" can be found at the link below. "Watch 'We Should All Be Feminists - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at TEDxEuston' Video at TEDxTalks," TEDx, April 29, 2013, http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/We-should-all-be-feminists-Chim.

> We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man.'[43]

The screen then freezes on the word "FEMINIST" as Adichie's voice continues: "Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes."

The image of Beyoncé, standing proudly erect with "FEMINIST" blazing behind her as her husband, daughter, and 13.7 million others[44] stared at her in awe, is a powerful one. Amanda Duberman, writing for Huffington Post, wrote about Beyoncé's VMA performance, observing that:

> …broadcasting the word "feminist" to millions of viewers in big, capital letters [is] arguably the most unambiguous pop culture pronouncement that, ***Yes, feminism is here***.
>
> [At the VMA's] Beyoncé didn't just prove (re: remind us that she's a feminist). She used a massive, multi-national platform to make sure we knew it matters. The moment represents a culmination of feminism's trickling from the edges into the pop culture mainstream—a process Beyoncé, whether one agrees with her approach or not—shot into overdrive.
>
> Beyoncé's VMA proclamation of feminist doesn't alleviate women's inequality, sexual assault, reproductive injustice or economic disparity... But it's a ringing endorsement for gender equality on a massive scale—and at the very least, it got us talking.[45]

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43 The full video of Beyoncé's VMA performance can be seen at http://www.mtv.com/news/1910270/beyonce-2014-vma-perfomance/ . Alexis, "Beyoncé's 2014 VMA Performance: Fearless, Feminist, Flawless, Family Time."

44 Lisa de Moraes, "MTV Video Music Awards Scores 13.7 Million Viewers Across Multiple Plays," Entertainment and News, Deadline, (August 26, 2014), http://deadline.com/2014/08/video-music-awards-ratings-mtv-vma-2014-824191/.

45 Amanda Duberman, "Beyoncé's Feminist VMAs Performance Got People Talking About Gender Inequality," The Huffington Post, August 25, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/25/beyonce-feminist-vmas_n_5708475.html.

Though the 2014 VMAs is but one incident in which Beyoncé emerged as an important figure in discussions of gender identity and feminism, it is important to begin with because it is emblematic of the larger implications that Beyoncé represents with regards to sex and gender politics. Her VMA performance, as well as her status as a feminist icon in popular culture, provoked an array of responses from vehemently critical to enthusiastically hopeful. In the next section, I will explore the Beyoncé's complex relationship to feminism and how her negotiations of gender and sexual identity are demonstrative of the complicated standards placed upon all women and also how her evolution as a feminist mirrors the journey of many young women who come to understand what it means to be a feminist through the lens of pop culture.

**Beyoncé's Feminist Evolution**

Beyoncé got her start in the entertainment industry through her role as lead singer in the all-girl R&B/Pop band, Destiny's Child,[46] which was active from 1996 until 2001, when the group split up to pursue solo careers. From early on, as lead member of Destiny's Child, Beyoncé was already singing songs about female empowerment and independence. "Independent Women Part I,"[47] encouraged women to be independent in their relationships and finances, proudly announcing: "Try to control me, boy, you get dismissed/ Pay my own fun, oh, and I pay my own bills/ Always 50/50 in relationships."[48] Another Destiny's Child hit, "Bills, Bills, Bills," [49]told the story of a woman who breaks up with her man for freeloading and not contributing to his share of

46 "Destiny's Child," The Official Destiny's Child Site, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.destinyschild.com.
47 Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland, and Michelle Williams, Independent Women Part I, MP3 (Columbia Records, 2000).
48 Ibid.
49 Beyoncé Knowles et al., Bills, Bills, Bills, CD Single (Columbia Records, 1999).

the expenses: "You're slowly making me pay for things/ Your money should be handling/ And now you ask to use my car/ Drive it all day and don't fill up the tank/ And you have the audacity/ To even come and step to me/ Ask to hold some money from me/ Until you get your check next week."[50]

In contrast with songs like "Independent Women Part I" and "Bills, Bills, Bills," however, were songs that were problematically un-feminist. From an early point in her career, Beyoncé seemed to oscillate between themes that could be read as feminist and those which featured a more subservient brand of femininity, with songs like "Cater 2 U"[51] placing emphasis on pleasing your man at all costs. "Cater 2 U" features lyrics like "…my life would/ Be purposeless without you," as the protagonist begs her man:

> Let me help you
> Take off your shoes
> Untie your shoestrings
> Take off your cufflinks
> What do you want to eat boo
> Let me feed you
> Let me run your bathwater
> Whatever you desire, I'll supply ya[52]

The back and forth between feminist themes in her songs is one the Beyoncé would continue to demonstrate for some time to come. Beyoncé has grown up in the public eye and we have watched her transformation, from girl to woman, from confused teen to the ultimate icon of female empowerment. The trajectory of Beyoncé's career is remarkable

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50 Ibid.
51 Beyoncé Knowles, Michelle Williams, and Kelly Rowland, Cater 2 U, CD Single (Columbia Records, 2005), 2.
52 Knowles, Williams, and Rowland, Cater 2 U.

not just for its demonstration of sheer success, as an example of truly "making it to the top." Beyoncé's career trajectory is also important for its synchronicity with her development as a feminist.

Until recently, many women in the entertainment industry have been hesitant to attribute the term 'feminist' to themselves, with actresses and singers like Shailene Woodley and Taylor Swift both demonstrating that the word 'feminist' not only carries negative connotations but also is apparently a mystifying term that many do not understand.[53] As Andi Zeisler of *Bitch Magazine* notes, even "Madonna, who preceded Beyoncé as the world's most captivating performer, has long had feminism ascribed to her in combative op-eds… and in college courses with names like 'Madonna Studies.' But Madge herself has never self-applied the descriptor, preferring to call herself a 'humanist.'"[54]

To look at Beyoncé's career is to see her tentatively dipping her toes into feminist waters, playing with her self-representation and coming to terms with her gender, race, and sexuality. In an interview in 2013 with British Vogue, Beyoncé was asked if she considered herself a feminist. She ambivalently responded:

> That word can be very extreme… But I guess I am a modern-day feminist. I do believe in equality. Why do you have to choose what type of woman

53 In an interview where Woodley was asked if she was a feminist, she responded: "I think the idea of 'raise women to power, take the men away from the power' is never going to work out because you need balance." Taylor Swift responded to a similar question with, "I don't really think about things as guys versus girls. I never have I was raised by parents who brought me up to think if you work as hard as guys, you can go far in life." See: Eliana Dockterman, "Shailene Woodley On Why She's Not A Feminist," Time, May 5, 2014, http://time.com/87967/shailene-woodley-feminism-fault-in-our-stars/; "Don't Go Calling Taylor Swift a Feminist, Says Taylor Swift," Jezebel, accessed March 15, 2015, http://jezebel.com/5953879/dont-go-calling-taylor-swift-a-feminist-says-taylor-swift.

54 Andi Zeisler, "The VMAs Cemented Feminism as Beyoncé's Brand. What Comes Next?," Bitch Magazine, August 27, 2014, http://bitchmagazine.org/post/beyonc%C3%A9-has-claimed-feminism-as-her-brand-but-whats-next.

> you are? Why do you have to label yourself anything? I'm just a woman and I love being a woman… I do believe in equality and that we have a way to go and it's something that's pushed aside and something that we have been conditioned to accept… But I'm happily married. I love my husband.[55]

This interview—which took place during the the same year in which *Beyoncé* was released and the singer declared herself to be a full-fledged feminist—earned her much flack from critics who hailed her feminism as 'feminism lite,'[56] with some even going so far as to criticize Beyoncé's explicit feminist declaration as artificial because "this is corporate entertainment," claiming that Beyoncé added the feminist messages in "to get the people talking and thus sell more records."[57]

Scholars, critics, and social media diehards have spent countless hours debating the question of whether or not Beyoncé is a feminist. They have picked apart her work, her words, and her images to ascertain if she is performing feminism in the proper way. However, there is no 'right' way and Beyoncé's incredibly public proclamation of a feminist stance irrefutably makes her a feminist. This negotiation and acceptance of feminism that Beyoncé has undergone in the public eye is of utmost importance. First, because it demonstrate Collins' notion that, for feminists, particularly black feminists, the personal is political.

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55 Maureen O'Connor, "Beyoncé Is a 'Feminist, I Guess,'" http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/04/beyonc-is-a-feminist-i-guess.html, NYMag.com: The Cut, accessed March 10, 2015, http://thecutsocial.nymag.com/thecut/2013/04/beyonc-is-a-feminist-i-guess.html.
56 "Black Feminism Lite? More Like Beyoncé Has Taught Us Black Feminism Light," The Huffington Post, accessed February 16, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omiseaeke-natasha-tinsley/beyonce-black-feminism_b_6123736.html.
57 "On Defending Beyoncé: Black Feminists, White Feminists, and the Line In the Sand -," accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2013/12/defending-beyonce-black-feminists-white-feminists-line-sand/.

Second of all, her transformation echoes a process of acceptance that many women can relate to. Cate Young, writing for *Jezebel*, notes that Beyoncé's transition from apprehension about feminism to fully embracing it is incredibly important because

> …it's an honest reflection of the way most women come into feminism; bit by bit and piece by piece, slowly building on their understanding of the term, what it means, and how it applies to their life. I love that Beyoncé has admitted to watching videos about feminism on YouTube. For so many women, and especially women who look like her...the internet and popular culture is *exactly* how they came into feminism. It's entertaining and refreshing to find that even Beyoncé, Ruler of The Universe, accesses feminism in this way, and in turn, contributes to this practice by inserting feminist ideals into her music.[58]

In the age of YouTube and Twitter and social media, figures like Beyoncé may not be a one-stop-shop for a complete lesson on feminism but they are the introduction to feminism, the tip of the iceberg, that gets women exploring and asking questions about what it means to be a woman and stand up for gender equality.

Furthermore, Beyoncé's transformation into pop feminism's queen is particularly significant for how it has affected representations of black femininity and sexuality in popular culture. Through her use of alter egos and feminine artifice, Beyoncé is simultaneously coming to terms with the duplicitous nature of gendered identity, which is wholly constructed but set forth as natural, as well as questioning the racial implications of femininity and sexuality that have unfortunately carried over from the Victorian era to womanhood into the 21st century.

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58 "An Incomplete (Play)List And Critical Analysis of Beyoncé's Feminist Evolution And Praxis Through Music: Part One," Powder Room, accessed February 26, 2015, http://powderroom.jezebel.com/an-incomplete-play-list-and-critical-analysis-of-beyon-1562314439.

**Feminine Complexity and the Duplicitous Female Identity**

The trajectory of Beyoncé's career is not just a trajectory of her growth as a feminist but also demonstrative of her exploration of alter egos. In "'Check On It': Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video," Aisha Durham notes how Beyoncé's chameleon-like ability to transform and embody different female roles is one aspect of her performativity that has made her such a popular figure. Her ability to convincingly play a multitude of different female identities makes her an appealing persona; her range of character-play makes her a site of accessibility to her fans who are better able to identify with her because she is constantly reinventing her image and gendered identity to play certain roles. One notable instance of this is Beyoncé's notorious alter ego, Sasha Fierce. Sasha Fierce is the alter ego Beyoncé assumes when she goes on stage. Beyoncé, who, in interviews, is surprisingly meek and soft-spoken, undergoes a transformation into the fiery vixen that is Sasha Fierce when she takes the stage, channeling the alter ego as a way to amplify her dynamic performances. Durham marvels at how:

> During one show, Beyoncé as Sasha Fierce can don a dominatrix costume complete with thigh-high patent-leather boots and matching black briefs to recreate the almost X-rated Sharon Stone leg-crossing interrogation scene from *Basic Instinct*, and a commercial break later accept an MTV music video award wearing a white evening gown without a pause or a stain to her wholesome image as the Southern belle of hip hop culture.

Beyoncé's ability to transform and embody different conceptions of what it means to be a woman exposes the instability of gender identity; her immense popularity and her ability to portray different sides of the coin that is femininity would seem to celebrate and take

pleasure in the "multiple and varied pleasures and meanings" that can be articulated through media.

As noted previously, in 2013, Beyoncé unexpectedly released a new, self-titled, visual album which featured both a full set of new songs and a fully realized music video for each new track. *Beyoncé* was released without any anticipatory marketing and the initial release was a completely digital. With *Beyoncé*, Sasha Fierce was officially gone, as Beyoncé's latest alter ego—'Yonce—emerged. 'Yonce was sexually liberated, edgy, and provocative. 'Yonce didn't care what anyone thought and was largely in charge of her own sexuality and pleasure. The good-girl Beyoncé of the past was re-negotiated with this new alter ego.

Beyoncé says the inception of her 'Yonce persona was organic and natural, suggesting that it gave her a sense of completion as a woman:

> …I love it, I think Beyoncé is Beyoncé, Mrs. Carter is Beyoncé, Sasha Fierce is Beyoncé. And I'm finally at a place where I don't have to separate the two. It's all piece of me, and just different elements of a personality of a woman, because we are complicated.[59]

Beyoncé's use of alter egos can be read as a way of negotiating her own female identity and coming to terms with the conflicts and contradictions that arise from the complexity of femininity. As Aisha Durham notes, Beyoncé:

> … successfully performs a range of Black femininities, speaking to Black working class and middle class sensibilities while fulfilling her dynamic role as both a hip-hop belle and a U.S. exotic other globally. The music

59 "Beyoncé Explains The Birth Of 'Yoncé,'" The Huffington Post, accessed February 16, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/21/beyonce-yonce-screening_n_4487104.html.

> video emerges as the celebrity-making medium by which the form and function of the spectacular Black female body is rearticulated.[60]

Through her identity play, Beyoncé uses her live performances and music videos as an outlet through which to explore and rearticulate how the black woman is represented visually in popular culture. Not only is she actively attempting to understand her own feminine identity through this role-play but, given her incredibly public position, she is also publicly contributing to the re-negotiation of representations of black feminine identity in popular culture.

Beyoncé's use of alter egos similarly works to show her coming to terms with her feminist identity and 'trying on' different personas to provide increased agency that she might lack the confidence to embody without the shroud of female masquerade. Beyoncé—the entrepreneur, the mother, the wife, the sexually liberated woman—all became possible through her exploration of alter egos and enabled her to fall into the role of pop feminist icon.

**Beyoncé's Exploration of Representations of Black Femininity**

The set of associations tied to femininity have been bound together and melded over time to seem almost inseparable. Since the Victorian era, black femininity and white femininity have been radically oppositional. The evolution of femininity has not escaped a certain set of expectations that sutures race and feminine identity so that it is always black OR white rather than black AND white. The white female has long been associated with the inaccessible, the pure; the white woman as clean and chaste, practically asexual,

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60 Aisha Durham, "'Check On It': Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video," Feminist Media Studies 12, no. 1 (March 2012): 35, doi:10.1080/14680777.2011.558346.

tied to domesticity. The appeal of the white female has long been based on ideals of unattainability; the puritanical white female presents the ultimate carnal challenge for the man's pleasure.[61]

On the flipside, we have the arcane stereotypes of black femininity that have unfortunately also persisted to become a part of how gender is inherently racially coded. The black female is often associated with near-primitive sexuality, with dirt and savagery, with wildness and an animalistic urge that cannot be ignored. For black female artists, their lyrics and performances often demonstrate "… the collocation of black female sexuality, the animal and the feral [that] has been a continuing, albeit not always dominant, feature of black music during the twentieth century—not only the music produced by black men but also that produced by black women artists as well."[62] The white asexual woman and the black hypersexual woman are tired tropes that beg to be re-negotiated.

Early on in her career, Beyoncé made a marked point to take control over how she was represented as a black female. In 2011, Beyoncé fired her longtime manager (and father), Matthew Knowles, because she wanted complete creative control over how she was represented as a black woman, both in her music and in other facets of her career.[63]

As her career progressed, Beyoncé grew bolder with her representations of female sexuality and stopped holding back with her self-representation. Along with *Beyoncé,* her 2013 visual album, Beyoncé released a 5-part mini documentary about her creation of the

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61 Diane Railton and Paul Watson, "Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women: Representations of Female Heterosexuality in Music Video," Feminist Media Studies 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 54–56, doi:10.1080/14680770500058207.
62 Ibid., 95.
63 "Beyonce Reveals Reason for Firing Father/Manager Mathew Knowles," The Boombox, accessed March 15, 2015, http://theboombox.com/beyonce-reveals-reason-for-firing-father/.

album. In Part 5: Honesty, Beyoncé speaks about how she has long played it safe with her career, particularly with her sexuality, because she felt a responsibility to keep things 'clean' for her fans.[64] This came at a big cost; limiting her sexuality made her feel as if she was never fully able to express every side of her personality.

For too long, Beyoncé had been grappling with the problem of black female sexuality. She had to either "deny [her] sexuality entirely in order to be considered respectable and worthy (not so coincidentally placing [herself] firmly into Mammy territory), or embrace [her] sexuality, as all women should have the right to do, and be seen as a confirmation of negative black sexual stereotypes."[65] With *Beyoncé*, the singer chose to own her sexuality rather than let the historical exploitation of black sexuality limit the ways in which she chose to represent herself. As you will see in my analysis of a select number of music videos off of her visual album, as well as a few of her older music videos, Beyoncé has pushed herself to explore every facet of her femininity, raising questions about race, gender, and sexuality along the way.

## Textual Analysis

*Beyoncé: The Visual Album that Changed Pop Feminism*

The release of Beyoncé's fifth studio album, *Beyoncé,*[66] was a landmark moment for the popstar. The surprise release shocked the world; that one of the most infamous popstars in the world could, with zero marketing (and zero leaks to the press), pull off a digital album release that included 17 complete music videos was a feat in and of itself.

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64 "Watch All Five Parts of the Beyoncé Documentary," Vulture, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/watch-all-five-parts-of-the-beyonce-documentary.html.
65 Cate Young, "The Beyoncé Conversation: Feminism, Black Women and The Presumption Of Sexual Agency," BattyMamzelle, February 16, 2014, http://battymamzelle.blogspot.com/2014/02/The-Beyonce-Conversation-Black-Women-Feminism-And-The-Presumption-Of-Sexual-Agency16.html.
66 Knowles, Beyoncé.

That the album broke iTunes records and sold 823,773 copies in its first three days[67] was only to be expected from such an unanticipated and dynamic move from the Queen of Pop.

The album was met with glowing reviews, with *Rolling Stone* commending all the "nasty highs" she hits throughout the album, finishing off the review by noting: "Beyoncé may have gotten 'bored' with the popstar routine, as she confesses in 'Ghost.' But only massive hubris could have made a feat like this album possible. And Beyoncé's hubris makes the world a better, more Beyoncé-like place."[68]

Meanwhile, *Pitchfork* commended *Beyoncé* for the album's provocations, stating that the album pushes boundaries

> …not because it sells sex at every turn, but because it treats a power-balanced marriage as a place where sexuality thrives. At a time when young people are gripped by an ideological fear of monogamy's advertised doldrums, *Beyoncé* boldly proposes the idea that a woman's prime—personal, professional, and especially sexual—can occur within a stable romantic partnership.[69]

*Beyoncé* was the popstar's feminist manifesto, her pièce de résistance, and what was most remarkable was the celebration of the multiplicities of femininity and the feminist messages embedded within the album.

As many of the reviews noted, Beyoncé embraced her sexuality wholeheartedly with this album, with songs like "Partition," "Rocket," and "Blow." "Blow" and

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67 Eliana Dockterman, "Flawless: 5 Lessons in Modern Feminism From Beyoncé," Time, December 17, 2013, http://time.com/1851/flawless-5-lessons-in-modern-feminism-from-beyonce/.
68 "Beyonce Beyoncé Album Review," Rolling Stone, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/beyonce-20131214.
69 "Beyoncé: Beyoncé," Pitchfork, accessed March 15, 2015, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/18821-beyonce-beyonce/.

"Rocket" both focused explicitly on female oral pleasure, an incredibly bold move and one that took a stand for gender equality in the face of the scores of rap artists who brag constantly in their music about receiving oral sex. Beyoncé makes it clear that men are not the only ones who can receive pleasure through her bold declarations of female sexuality.

Beyoncé's emphasis on fully embracing her sexual side is made clear not just in the lyrics of the songs but in the images of the music videos. The music video, *Partition,*[70] features an aggressively sexual Beyoncé, accompanied by her husband, Jay-Z, as the lyrics tell the tale of a tryst between the couple in the back of the limo on the way to the club. Later in the video, Beyoncé dances on stage like a stripper as Jay-Z watches, though he is the only member of the audience. Beyoncé writhes on stage, her sexy silhouette starkly contrasted against a purple background. As she dances, a voice is heard speaking in French on the soundtrack. The voice coos lustily:

> Est-ce que tu aimes le sexe?
> Le sexe, je veux dire l'activité physique, le coït, tu aimes ça?
> Tu ne t'intéresses pas au sexe?
> Les hommes pensent que les féministes déstestent le sexe mais
> c'est une activité très stimulante et naturelle que les femmes adorent.[71]

This is a subtle moment and the words are easy to overlook, but the English translation speaks volumes about Beyoncé's anthem of sexual liberation. In English, the phrase translates roughly to: "Don't you like sex? Sex. I mean sex, the physical activity. Fucking. You like that? You're not interested in sex? Men think feminists don't like sex,

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70 Jake Nava, Partition, Music Video (Columbia Records, 2014), http://www.vevo.com/watch/beyonce/Partition-(Explicit-Video)/USSM21302432.
71 Cate Young, "Est-Ce Que Tu Aimes Le Sexe?: Yoncé Brings Feminism To Its Knees," BattyMamzelle, December 14, 2013, http://battymamzelle.blogspot.com/2013/12/Yonce-Brings-Feminism-To-Its-Knees.html.

but it's a very fun and natural activity that women love."[72] Here Beyoncé obliterates the stereotype that feminists are men-hating prudes, proving that owning her sexuality does not mean renouncing her feminist title.

In comparison with the more sexual songs on the album, some of her other tracks sound like a totally different person—and the music videos might as well feature a different woman. In *Blue,*[73] the track and accompanying music video dedicated to (and featuring) Blue Ivy Carter, the daughter of Jay-Z and Beyoncé, shows a luminous mother with her child. Beyoncé is in minimal makeup, walking through the sand as she serenades her daughter: "Each day I feel so blessed to be looking at you/ 'Cause when you open your eyes, I feel alive/ My heart beats so damn quick when you say my name." The video intersperses shots of the mother and daughter with clips of the beautiful tropical scenery in Rio de Janeiro where the video was shot.

The images focus equally on Beyoncé and Blue and on the local families, who mingle and laugh as their children play and dance in the streets. At one point, local girls dance in a manner the evokes Beyoncé's choreography in earlier videos, acting as a reminder of Beyoncé's global influence on women and young girls everywhere.[74] The spirit of motherhood and family is strong in the video and shows a radically different facet of Beyoncé's femininity from the music videos that depict her as a sexually liberated woman or a devoted wife.

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72 Ibid.
73 Beyoncé Knowles, Ed Burke, and Bill Kirstein, Blue Ft. Blue Ivy, Music Video (Columbia Records, 2013).
74 "Beyoncé's Daughter Plays a Starring Role in New Tribute Song Blue," Mail Online, accessed March 15, 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2523018/Beyonces-daughter-Blue-Ivy-plays-starring-role-new-tribute-song-Blue.html.

While that is just a brief glimpse of *Beyoncé,* it should provide an idea of the vastly different depictions of womanhood that Beyoncé gives her spectator, reaffirming that she can indeed be a feminist who is also sexual, who is powerful, who is maternal, who is successful, without any single facet of her femininity being compromised along the way. Furthermore, Beyoncé tackles age-old tropes associated with black sexuality and femininity and, although not dispelling them, pushes them into public discourse in an attempt to affect change.

*"Beautiful Liar": Ethnic Ambiguity and a Transnational Sisterhood*

In 2006, Beyoncé collaborated with Colombian Latin pop sensation Shakira on the song "Beautiful Liar," which appeared on Beyoncé's 2007 album *B'Day*.[75] The song melds the Hip-Hop and R&B musical style of Beyoncé with the Middle Eastern and Latin-influenced vibes of Shakira's music. Lyrically, the song tells the tale of a love triangle in which both women involved find out about the 'other woman' in their man's life and—over the course of the song—realize that they must not blame each other for their man's infidelity but, instead, they need to band together in sisterly solidarity and hold the man accountable for his actions.

The music video for "Beautiful Liar" is fairly simple; the visuals have little to do with the narrative of infidelity, save for the fact that Shakira and Beyoncé play the parts of the scorned women. The visuals, taken alone, do not appear to be significant—merely something eye-catching and aesthetically pleasing to evoke interest in the spectator. However, when taken in conjunction with the lyrics of the song, the visuals reveal deeper

75 Beyoncé Knowles, B'Day, Studio Album (Columbia Records/ Music World, 2006).

and more complex meanings that elevate the message of the song above that of a love triangle into larger realms of gender, race, and sexuality.

*Beautiful Liar*[76] is significant for its progression, its transformation as the music video plays out. There are a few key markers that evolve as the music video develops which signal the larger themes of sisterly solidarity and feminism. I will address these markers in depth later, but they are worth introducing before I break them down more thoroughly later. The mise-en-scène and cinematography are one important factor to pay attention to as the video progresses. The styling of the women's hair is another small but very significant factor of the music video that plays an important role in complicating issues of gender as an inherently racialized process. Finally, the call-and-response between Beyoncé and Shakira becomes important as the music video progresses; the earlier verses demonstrate a clearly-demarcated lead singer with the other woman singing backup vocal, whereas the final verse puts both artists on equal vocal ground, emphasizing their voices in equal measure.

Narratively, the music video can be broken down into three separate sequences, with the chorus taking place between—and separating—each of these sequences. I will differentiate between these sequences by referring to them as Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3. In Part 1, the song begins and the exotic Middle Eastern piping is heard as the camera crossfades back-and-forth between Beyoncé and Shakira in an extreme close up, with a foggy mist shrouding the clarity of their faces. As the first verse begins, the music video cuts between Beyoncé and Shakira (who, in Part 1, are never in the same frame) as they sing and dance in front of different backgrounds; Beyoncé performs at dawn while

76 Jake Nava, Beautiful Liar, Music Video, Latin Pop, R&B (Columbia Records, 2007), http://www.vevo.com/watch/beyonce/Beautiful-Liar/USSM20700730.

Shakira sings at dusk. In Part 1, Beyoncé sings lead vocals and conveys the majority of the narrative, while Shakira sings in an intense, staccato style as she responds in the background to Beyoncé's claims. The lyrical exchange between the artists in this verse begins aggressively. Take, for example, these opening lines:

> **Beyoncé**: He said I'm worth it.. His one desire
> **Shakira:** I know things about him that you wouldn't want to read about
> **Beyoncé:** He kissed me, his one and only.. Beautiful Liar
> **Shakira:** Tell me how you tolerate the things that you just found out about

The verse privileges Beyoncé at the start, with Shakira playing the role of mistress who shatters Beyoncé's illusions of her idealized man. As the verse leads into the chorus, the two girls begin to sing together and lament that the man is never the one to be blamed in these types of situations, realizing that it is foolish for the girls to blame each other and fail to hold the man responsible for his infidelities.

The first chorus features the women in the same space—a large room covered in sand with silky, grey strips of fabric hanging from the ceiling and blowing in the wind. Though the women sing together, they are framed separately (despite their presence in what is clearly the same diegetic space).

At the close of the first chorus, Part 2 begins. Shakira takes the vocal lead in this verse, telling her side of the story while Beyoncé quips responses in the staccato manner demonstrated by Shakira in Part 1. The women are in what appears to be a forest of bamboo, again framed separately and with mise-en-scene that differentiates the women. Beyoncé is featured in a brightly lit, white bamboo forest with an exotic-looking orchid pinned into her slicked back updo. Shakira's portions in this sequence are in the bamboo forest after dark, sensuous and intimate to contrast Beyoncé's clinical and chaste appearance in her portion of Part 2.

The second chorus begins and we are transported back to the sandy room with the billowing, grey sheets. The camera work here is rapid, first cutting back and forth between the women in the same space until the camera, in what I will argue is a significant shift, begins to whip-pan between the two women, highlighting—and bringing attention to—the fact that they are indeed in the same space.

The final verse—and its accompanying sequence in the music video—is arguably the most intriguing piece of all, ultimately bringing race and gender representation to the forefront of our discussion. Part 3 takes place in a dark room and opens with an overhead, close-up shot of Beyoncé and Shakira, lying on their backs with their heads in the center of the frame. Shakira and Beyoncé are vocally emphasized equally during this verse, and during the musical interlude in this sequence, they are also emphasized equally by the visuals. The two are dressed almost identically and their hair is styled to look identical as well. More importantly, through tricky camera work and editing, the camera intentionally makes it difficult to distinguish Shakira from Beyoncé as the two gyrate their hips in Shakira's infamous style. This seems conceptually absurd; Beyoncé is a taller, curvier African-American woman whereas Shakira is a petite, slim Latina; to make them visually indistinguishable to the audience cannot have been easy and, I would argue, the successful attempt to pull off this effect suggests that blurring racial lines and pushing *Beautiful Liar* into the void of ethnic ambiguity was of utmost importance to those behind this music video.

The deeply embedded social and cultural commentary of *Beautiful Liar* is vocalized not through the lyrics but through the transformation and progression of the mise-en-scene, cinematography, hairstyling, costuming, and vocal emphasis of the music

video. The clearly demarcated parts of the music video begin by separating the women, calling attention to their difference. With each chorus, however, the differences between them become more and more obscured until, ultimately, the women become one and the necessity of separating one from the other disappears as they unite as one (both metaphorically and visually).

Though a subtle element of the music video, the hairstyling in *Beautiful Liar* cannot be ignored. Taken alone, the different hairstyles throughout the video might not be remarkable, but when taken alongside the other stylistic elements of the music video, they take on new meaning. Diane Railton and Paul Watson, in "Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women", note how Beyoncé's hair is always in constant motion.[77] Whether her hair is

> …straightened or curly, loose or tied, wet or dry, whether her body is moving or not, her hair moves or is moved; it swings as she walks, it is shaken as she dances, it is blown by the wind and fans, and it is brushed across, or away from, her face and mouth.[78]

bell hooks similarly notes how "[b]lack female singers who project a sexualized persona are as obsessed with hair as they are with body size and body parts," arguing that much of the sexualized imagery for black female celebrities is centered around hair, a fact that is "ironically appropriate [considering] that much of this hair is synthetic and man-made, artificially constructed as is the sexualized image it is meant to evoke."[79] Beyoncé's hair is a significant, racially coded facet of her image. The music video introduces her with chic, straight hair at the start of the video, juxtaposed against the untamed wildness of

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77 Railton and Watson, "Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women: Representations of Female Heterosexuality in Music Video," 58.
78 Ibid.
79 bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation, 1st edition (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 70.

Shakira's curls. In Part 2, as Shakira takes the lead vocally, she is shown with sleek, straightened hair while Beyoncé is relegated to the background with her hair styled in tight, constrained ponytail that further emphasizes the Eastern influences in the mise-en-scene in Part 2. Interestingly enough, both chorus sequences seek to de-codify their hairstyles by showing them both with wild, curly locks and, as I have mentioned, in Part 3, the identical hairstyles sported by the duo aids in the video's ability to render the women inseparable and erases their ethnic difference for at least a brief moment.

This isn't just an aesthetic choice; it isn't just about hair. It's about change and agency. The moment in which the women are separated—by the camera, by their hairstyles, by their lead on the vocal track—are the moments in which their racial differences are highlighted and set against each other. The moments of cohesion and synthesis that the music video underscores — the moments in which the women are dressed and styled identically, in a shared frame, with equal vocal emphasis and agency — are the same instances which seek to render their physical and racial differences invisible, seeking instead to unite them as women, no modifiers.

*Telephone: An Exploration of Racialized Representations of Gender*

In 2010, Beyoncé teamed up with pop sensation Lady Gaga in a collaboration called "Telephone."[80] *Telephone*,[81] the music video for the song, is fascinating for many reasons—namely, its narrative, its cinematic style, and its portrayal and usurpation of archetypical race and gender roles. Channeling pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, as well as the directorial style of Quentin Tarantino, *Telephone*

80 Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles, "Telephone (ft. Beyoncé)", MP3, The Fame Monster (Streamline/ Kon Live/ Cherrytree/ Interscope, 2010).
81 Lady Gaga and Jonas Åkerlund, Lady Gaga - Telephone Ft. Beyoncé, Music Video (Interscope Records, 2010), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBsypHzF3U&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

immediately marks itself as performance art, a delicate sociocultural exploration that finds its recourse in the audiovisual interplay and cinematic nature.

*Telephone* picks up where Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi* music video leaves off. Gaga has committed a crime and is being led into jail to serve her time. Gaga sits in jail until Beyoncé calls and comes to bail her out. Riding in the Pussywagon from *Kill Bill Vol. I*,[82] Beyoncé and Gaga drive off into the sunset. Later, Beyoncé sits with her man at a diner. He is a misogynist and treats Beyoncé terribly. With the help of Gaga, who is a chef in the kitchen, Gaga and Beyoncé poison not only Beyoncé's man but everyone in the diner. The music video concludes with a celebratory dance sequence in the diner in which an American flag-clad Gaga and Beyoncé jubilantly dance amidst the bodies of their victims.

The music video, clocking in at a whopping nine minutes, is a minefield of potent imagery that, with all its cultural references and hypertextuality, simply begs to be analyzed as a social and cultural commentary. *Telephone* calls attention to issues of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary America and points towards a future of change in which the boundaries and limitations of difference, whether it be racial, sexual, or otherwise, dissolve, unsettling the status quo and destabilizing the idea of 'normal.' On the surface, *Telephone* might strike the spectator as frivolous and latent of meaning but, with Lady Gaga and Beyoncé, nothing is ever latent of meaning. There are a few striking instances in the music video which take the politics of gender and race to task. *Telephone*'s gravity comes not from its disparate parts but from the interwoven network of associations that, throughout the video, combine to connote a call for equality.

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82 Quentin Tarantino, Kill Bill: Vol. 1, Action, Crime, (2003).

*Telephone* is, after all, a narrative. It is a short one, but it is nonetheless a story whose agenda unfolds and develops over time. Thus, I find it prudent to walk through the narrative of the music video chronologically and piece together the significance as it progresses. The music video begins as credits roll over scenes of a prison. From the very first shot, this music video is asking us to think about *Telephone* as a product of culture and, like many films, a product that can carry a larger, overarching message. The first scene begins, as a black-and-white clad Gaga is lead into prison. The female guards that lead her in are both incredibly masculine, large compared to her tiny frame. Gaga is stripped of her outfit—of her individuality and identity, you might say—and left nearly naked in her cell. Infuriated, Gaga clings to the bars of the cell, baring her genitals to the guards as she rattles against the bars like a caged animal. One guard snorts at Gaga's genital display as she walks away, exclaiming, "I told you she didn't have a dick," referring to rampant rumors that circulated about Lady Gaga suggesting that she was actually a hermaphrodite.

This comment is a very explicit reference to the persecution Lady Gaga has had to endure due to her position in the public eye. This is also an important moment in the video for its implications concerning gender, sexuality, and representations of femininity. Lady Gaga's trademark aesthetic is the abnormal; her absurd outfits constantly eschew conventional beauty norms and gender roles. Gaga often represents herself in a decidedly androgynous manner, which prompted the rumors about her sexuality. This scene in the jail cell is Gaga's retort to those who have made assumptions about her based on the way she dresses herself and displays an alternative type of femininity; Lady Gaga is pointing to the absurdity of the fact that she must physically strip herself naked for the public to

prove that, just because her self-representation is not the norm does not make her any less female.

The scene at the prison is rife with moments like this; brief nods that bear larger implications concerning representations of race and gender. Gender is and always has been a racialized process. Depictions of femininity are inherently bound up in racial difference; Black and white femininity are in no way the same, in fact, they are often oppositional in how they depict the female sex. As Jacques Derrida noted, "There can be no pure opposites, each component of a binary opposition is ultimately dependent on the other and is motivated by the absent other for its own presence and meaning."[83] The binary relationship between man and woman, black and white—these are the relationships that *Telephone* seeks to explore. The pairing of Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, both on a diegetic scale and on a larger, cultural scale, invites the viewer to draw comparisons between the two, to note the difference between their manifestations of femininity.

*Telephone* attempts to re-negotiate that relationship in a multitude of ways. Over the course of the music video, Lady Gaga oscillates between a stark, clinical representation of femininity and a hypersexualized, incredibly lascivious one. One moment, Gaga is clad in a modest, geometric, black and white striped suit with a large hat and sunglasses, closing off her female sexuality and exaggerating her cold inaccessibility. The next moment, Gaga is nearly nude, in a black, leather studded bikini as she makes out with one of the women in the prison yard (who happens to be the most

83 Linda Besigiroha, "Independent Women? Feminist Discourse in Music Videos," in Gendered (Re)Visions: Constructions of Gender in Audiovisual Media, ed. Marion (ed. and introd.) Gymnich, Kathrin (ed.) Ruhl, and Klaus (ed.) Scheunemann (Göttingen, Germany: V&R, 2010), 230.

masculine looking of all the inmates). She dances in the kitchen wearing a white dress that look as if it is made of plastic, literally hard and cold and impenetrable. Later, she gyrates in front of the Pussywagon clad in a skin-tight leopard-print pantsuit, shaking her butt and writhing her body aggressively.

Juxtaposed with Gaga is Beyoncé, her savior from prison, who speeds off in the Pussywagon as they carry on with their murderous plot. Beyoncé's wardrobe in the video is often rather unconventional; when she first arrives at the prison, she is wearing a revealing black leather cropped top and skirt, sporting stark black and yellow eye makeup with a dark, nearly black lipstick. Her hair is styled in a manner very unlike Beyoncé's normal hairstyling; it is clear from the first moment that Beyoncé has been Gaga-fied, as Gaga has imposed her own aesthetic onto Beyoncé. Though her outfit is incredibly suggestive, the skimpy outfit is at odds with the demeanor of Beyoncé's character, Honeybee. Honeybee is demure, quietly stern and it is rare that she speaks. Furthermore, by her presence in Gaga's video, Beyoncé's femininity is marked as abnormal and coded differently than one would typically expect from the pop icon.

Neither woman fits into the preconceived roles associated with their gender and the music video is constantly turning racialized femininity on its head and pushing for female solidarity and the disbanding of the 'otherness' associated with black femininity, as well as questioning the 'normality' of whiteness. As opposed to the inmates Gaga encounters in prison who constantly turn against one another in aggression, Gaga and Beyoncé unite in solidarity against their enemy—the masses who are characterized by excess, those who buy into the notions fed to them by society and partake in the perpetuation of problematic ideals of race and femininity. Gaga and Beyoncé are

simultaneously deconstructing archaic representations of raced female sexuality and nodding towards a future in which the female, regardless of color or sexuality, possesses increased agency.

The music industry is an industry largely dominated by males and, as Linda Besigiroha notes, "In order to maintain a masculine image of power and control in much of today's music, there has to be a corresponding image of a submissive, controllable object at the other end of the binary formation, namely that of the woman, and, in some instances, that of the homosexual man."[84] It is not by accident that *Telephone* features, almost exclusively, women. Furthermore, the women represented do not adhere to traditional standards of female beauty; [85]their dress, makeup, hair, and demeanor mark them as others—and for some, like the guards in the prison, calls their sexuality into question. The men who are present within the music video, with the exception of the male victims in the diner, are portrayed in such a way that suggests they do not conform to heteronormative standards of masculinity.

For example, in the kitchen sequences, the background dancers are all male and they all sport full faces of makeup. The men in drag function as counterpart to Gaga's 'otherness' as a woman. Linda Besigiroha notes how, in feminist thought, the woman is typically represented with regard to what their representation means to the man, thus making woman *as woman*, by definition, absent from audiovisual representation. *Telephone* reverses this binary—the man is given meaning in the narrative through his

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 229.

relations to the woman, rather than the man receiving meaning through his own masculinity.

The push back against patriarchy can also be seen in the relationship between "Honeybee" and her man. At the start, of the diner scene, Honeybee's voice is never heard. She is silent, her dialogue is spelled out in a Japanese anime cartoon font rather than heard aurally. Her words appear onscreen as she vacantly stares ahead, smiling emptily. It is as if the presence of the man (and the other corrupt diner occupants) literally robs her of her ability to speak. Once he is eradicated (thanks to the poison), Beyoncé's voice is freed; she turns to his corpse as she says, "I knew you'd take all my honey, you selfish motherfucker." The union of Gaga and Beyoncé, two different colored sides to the coin of femininity, allow for the black woman to gain her voice again after so long being silenced.

Throughout the video, both Gaga and Beyoncé are challenging gender roles and questioning the assumptions tied to racialized femininity. Whether it be Gaga parodying the 1950s housewife stereotype as she makes sandwiches in the kitchen while she is flanked by a flamboyant, dancing entourage in drag makeup or the video's consistent use of fake 'surveillance' footage to challenge notions of the male gaze, *Telephone* seeks to uproot preconceived notions of gender and sexuality and push for a more fluid conception of femininity.

The conclusion of the video could be read as a look towards a more tolerant future. In the dance sequence, Beyoncé is in a costume reminiscent of Wonder Woman, a notable nod to feminism, as Wonder Woman was the ultimate symbol of suffragist

feminism.[86] With Gaga beside her, the duo dances alongside a troupe of dancing men in drag and androgynous looking females. Later, back in the Pussywagon, Gaga says, "Let's go far, far away from here…" to which Beyoncé queries, "Promise we'll never come back?" Gaga promises Beyoncé that they will never have to return and they pull away in the Pussywagon as they clasp hands in an homage to Thelma and Louise, grasping hands in solidarity, the contrasting colors of their gloves striking as they drive off towards a future with more flexible notions of gender, race, and sexuality

## Conclusion

Though Beyoncé has a massive, loyal following (The "Beyhive") and many who applaud the strides she has made for feminism, there are those who are skeptical of her positive impact on feminism. Annie Lenox notoriously decried Beyoncé's feminist beliefs as "feminism lite"[87] and others criticized her contradictory display of themes of female empowerment alongside a hyper-sexualized representation of herself, which could be read as catering to the male gaze. The very manner in which Beyoncé's every move is picked apart and declared feminist or anti-feminist exposes the impossible standards set for women to live up to, even women who wholeheartedly want to spread feminist thought and start a positive discussion about gender equality.

No woman, even Beyoncé, can be the perfect woman, the perfect feminist. Furthermore, any engagement with feminism or desire to empower women is a positive step towards gender equality. Thus, Beyoncé's actions should be read as seriously as any other feminist work, for the sheer scope of her reach makes her voice and her message

86 Jill Lepore, "Wonder Woman: The Feminist," The Guardian, accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/05/wonder-woman-the-feminist.
87 "Black Feminism Lite?"

crucial to analyze and understand for what it comes to bear on society and culture on a larger scale. Beyoncé's not the perfect woman but she is playing the role of many different women, none of them less perfect than any other—and that duplicitous fragmentation of identity somehow makes her all the more whole.

# Chapter 2

## Nicki Minaj: Identity Performance and Subversive Artifice

### "You know I—thug em, fuck em, love em, leave em/ 'Cause I don't fuckin' need em"[88]: Hip-Hop Culture and the Limitations of Female Agency

In the documentary film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes*, a former music video dancer looks into the camera and confesses: "I jokingly say that I'm in recovery from hip-hop. It's like being in a domestic violence situation. Your home is hip-hop and your man beats you."[89] Rap and hip-hop culture has long been a man's game, dominated by men and requiring its members to conform to "hip-hop's standard trifecta" of "masculinity, realness, and normative blackness"[90] if they are to achieve success in the genre. The hip-hop music video has long been an arena in which pervasive themes of misogyny, homophobia, and hyper-masculine braggadocio have been articulated.[91] The space for women in hip-hop is very narrow; women in hip-hop are often relegated to the background as the video "vixens, the sexually free, those who have learned to free themselves from the politics of respectability, and those still bound by its piercing claws."[92] These 'video girls' function primarily as sexual objects whose promiscuous

88 Jay-Z, "Big Pimpin'", MP3, Volume 3: Life and Times of S. Carter (Roc-A-Fella, Def Jam, 2000).
89 Byron Hurt, Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes, Documentary, Music, (2006).
90 McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics," 85.
91 One infamous example of this can be seen in the music video for rapper Nelly's 2003 song "Tip Drill," which shows women in bikinis dancing and simulating oral sex as men throw money at their bodies; the sexual objectification of women becomes almost surreal in the culminating moment in which Nelly swipes a credit card in between a dancer's butt cheeks which then begin to bounce and gyrate.
92 Amber Johnson, "Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory," Text and Performance Quarterly 34, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 182–200, doi:10.1080/10462937.2013.879991.

dancing acts as confirmation of the male performer's uber-masculinity and sexual prowess.

Patricia Hill Collins notes how the process of "…objectifying Black women's bodies turns them into canvases that can be interchanged for a variety of purposes…African American men who star in music videos construct a certain version of manhood against the backdrop of objectified, nameless, quasi naked Black women who populate the stage."[93] For those women who aspire to break into the hip-hop industry as artists, the challenge of transforming from object to subject, from nameless to famous, is a particularly difficult task. Male producers (who largely dominate the industry) encourage female rappers to exaggerate their sex appeal to attract attention and "this demand often trumps the musical interest of listeners who are more invested in their musical talents than their sex appeal" and perpetuates the assumption in predominantly male genres that "men are not interested in what women have to say."[94]

The men and women involved in hip-hop often reiterate and underscore the genre's marked demonstration of male privilege and compulsory heterosexuality, marginalizing—or blatantly excluding—the voices of women and queer participants within the genre. To break into the industry as a woman is a feat in and of itself; to break into the industry and achieve widespread acclaim and success, particularly as a woman who consistently hints at queerness and eschews heteronormative representations of femininity and sexuality, seems like a near-impossibility. Enter Onika Tanya Maraj.

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93 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, New Ed edition (New York; London: Routledge, 2005), 129.
94 Marquita R. Smith, "'Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian': Nicki Minaj and the Acknowledgement of Queer Desire in Hip-Hop Culture," Popular Music and Society 37, no. 3 (May 27, 2014): 361, doi:10.1080/03007766.2013.800680.

Better known by her stage name, Nicki Minaj, the Trinidadian-turned-New Yorker has proven that it is indeed possible for a woman to succeed in hip-hop and in the process of doing so has established her own unique style and musical aesthetic which "invigorat[es] hip-hop discourse by urging its consumers and producers to self-reflectively question and challenge its shortcomings."[95]

Following in the footsteps of female rappers like Missy Elliot, Foxy Brown, Queen Latifah, and Lil' Kim, Nicki Minaj has successfully crashed the hip-hop boys club, forcibly creating a space for herself within the genre and earning the respect of the hip-hop community not just as a female rapper but as a rapper, no modifier. While not your prototypical feminist icon, Minaj's drag-like performance style, frequent use of gender-bending alter egos, and razor sharp lyrics critiquing the widespread gender inequality in rap and hip-hop raises questions more broadly about what it means to be a woman in this society and how to understand the fluidity of female identity in this newborn era of pop feminism.

## Nicki Minaj: An Unconventional Face of Pop Feminism

Niki McGloster, writing for Vibe.com, notes that although Minaj might be a controversial figure, she is undoubtedly bringing issues of gender inequality to the fore of pop culture:

> No doubt, classifying her as a feminist will piss some [people] off. But from the stereo to the stage—and more directly, during interview settings—Nicki routinely addresses the misogyny running rampant in the entertainment industry and pipes up about double standards against women. Her methods may be unorthodox—the hyper-sexualized imagery and songs about "lookin' ass niggas" and "stupid hoes" could serve as

95 Ibid., 367.

> distractions from her message. But the Queens-bred rapper constantly cheerleads for women, not in traditional activism, but on billboard charts, in boardrooms and in interviews.[96]

Minaj's relationship to feminist discourse is undoubtedly complicated. Unlike Beyoncé, she consciously evades questions about her role as a feminist but simultaneously emphatically expresses her desire to empower women. Despite Minaj's unconventional and, to some, downright offensive expressions of femininity and sexuality, her cultural impact and the flurry of discourse surrounding her work suggests that "although Minaj's feminism looks different—it still matters."[97]

"Nicki Minaj"—or how Onika Tanya Maraj chooses to present herself to the public as Nicki Minaj—is constantly changing and complicating our notions of who this woman is. As Jess Butler notes, Minaj demonstrates a "refusal to stay in any one representational box for long."[98] There is a distinct lack of continuity—in her appearance, in her musical style, in her performance style, in her expressions of sexuality—which renders her a slippery subject for analysis and calls the very notions of race, gender, identity, and authenticity into question. Minaj's complexly executed persona does not seem accidental. In interviews, she expresses a distinct desire to evade categorization or finite definition: "I feel like people always wanna define me and I don't wanna be

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96 Niki McGloster, "Nicki Minaj: A Brief History Of Feminism," Online Magazine, Vibe, (March 4, 2014), http://www.vibe.com/photo-gallery/nicki-minaj-history-feminist-moments.
97 Amy Lam, "Nicki Minaj's Unapologetic Sexuality Is Not a Crisis," Online Magazine, Bitch Magazine, (August 28, 2014), http://bitchmagazine.org/post/nicki-minajs-unapologetic-sexuality-anaconda-video-feminism.
98 Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," Feminist Formations 25, no. 1 (2013): 51, doi:10.1353/ff.2013.0009.

defined…People who like me—they'll listen to my music, and they'll know who I am. I just don't like that people want you to say what you are, who you are. I just am."[99]

**Hip-Hop Culture and the Illusion of 'Realness'**

Hip-hop culture is intrinsically bound up in ideas of uber-masculine representations of blackness. In "Drake, Childish Gambino, and the Specter of Black Authenticity," Michael P. Jeffries notes how in hip-hop culture, there is a prescient demand to 'keep it real' that is fueled by the "encroachment of the music business on the mythically pure music of the urban poor."[100] The commercialization of rap music perpetuated an ideal of a racially-coded artist authenticity stemming from the mass consumption of black performance by a white audience. Jeffries continues:

> 'Real' blackness in commercial rap often requires hyper-masculine claims to dangerous ghetto experience, sexual power, and conspicuous consumption. Critics argue that commercial rap is nothing more than actors performing racist stereotypes of black male deviance in a soulless attempt to cash in. They key point here is that 'racial' authenticity is not merely racial—it depends on a particular version of dominating manhood for its cultural and commercial appeal.[101]

Though Minaj is criticized for her artifice, the rap industry places such exaggerated demands on its participants that no one, even its male constituents, can live up to these demands and thus participate in the very same artifice that they criticize Minaj for. As Jeffries notes, rapper Drake (born Aubrey Drake Graham) is often lambasted for his comfortable upbringing in Toronto and rise to fame as a child actor on the teen drama

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99 Vibe, "EXTRA, EXTRA: Lost Nicki Minaj Quotes (PG. 2)," March 29, 2012, http://www.vibe.com/article/extra-extra-lost-nicki-minaj-quotes-pg-2.
100 Michael P. Jeffries, "Drake, Childish Gambino, and the Specter of Black Authenticity," The Atlantic, November 22, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/11/drake-childish-gambino-and-the-specter-of-black-authenticity/248929/.
101 Ibid.

*Degrassi: The Next Generation*.[102] Similarly, Donald Glover (stage name Childish Gambino) who got his start as a writer for *30 Rock*[103] and is well-known for his role on NBC's sitcom *Community*[104] and his stand-up comedy, often raps about being called an "oreo"[105] and a "faggot" by his rivals. Because these men did not grow up in low-income families, because of their work in the entertainment industry, because they do not demonstrate aggressively violent portrayals of masculinity, they are somehow not 'black enough' to be respected by hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop's unrealistic set of demands sets the stage for artifice to run amok. Though it likes to pretend otherwise, the rap industry is fraught with the inauthentic. Many of the biggest names in rap are called not by their birth names but by pseudonyms; Jay-Z, Rick Ross, Gucci Mane, Lil' Wayne—these are all monikers which allow these men to legitimize their place in the industry through stage personas which authenticate their masculinity and 'realness.' Rick Ross was born William Roberts but assumed the name and identity of Rick Ross, a former cocaine kingpin who ran a massive drug empire in Los Angeles in the 1980s, in order to capitalize on the actual Ross' criminal past and 'thug' reputation to help sell his music.[106]

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102 Degrassi: The Next Generation, Drama, (2002).
103 30 Rock, Comedy, (2006).
104 Dan Harmon, Community, Comedy, Sitcom (Sony Pictures Television, 2009), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1439629/.
Josh Tyrangiel, "Music: The Three Faces Of Eminem," Time, accessed December 1, 2014, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002562,00.html.
105 "Oreo" is an insult directed at a Black person who is criticized for 'acting white' and therefore is black on the outside but white on the inside, like an Oreo cookie
106 Bossip Staff, "Lawsuits: The Real Rick Ross Suing Officer Ricky 'William Roberts' Rozay For Stealing His Name, Lyor Cohen Among Others To Testify," Bossip, January 11, 2013, http://bossip.com/709459/lawsuits-the-real-rick-ross-suing-officer-ricky-william-roberts-rozay-for-stealing-his-name-lyor-cohen-among-others-to-testify/.

If the black men of hip-hop must embellish on their identities in order to gain credence, the possibility of gaining recognition as a white or female rapper is exponentially more difficult. The use of artifice, not just in pseudonyms but in full-blown alter egos, would appear to open up a space through which those excluded from the rap industry—that is, whites, women, and queers—can express their voice and achieve an agency they would otherwise be denied. White rapper Marshall Mathers, known more frequently by his stage name, Eminem, is notorious for his use of alter egos in his music which allow him access to different styles of rapping and different ranges of topics. Eminem's "Slim Shady" is violent and dark while his "Ken Kariff" is a gay man who pokes fun at Eminem's songs.[107] Similarly, white rapper Mac Miller (born Malcolm James McCormick) produces under the pseudonym Larry Fishman while also transforming into distinct alter egos named Delusional Thomas and Larry Lovestein who rap alongside Mac Miller on his tracks.[108] As Judith Halberstam notes in *Feminine Masculinity*, "dominant male masculinities tend to present themselves in the register of the real, eschewing the performative and the artificial"[109] when, in actuality, masculinity is just as much of a social construct as femininity.

Why, then, is Nicki Minaj's artificiality so threatening? It would seem that it is her performance of gender and sexuality that create such unease amongst her critics. In her gender-bending alter egos and ambiguous displays of sexuality that eschew categorization, Minaj is not merely imitating hip-hop aesthetics and themes but parodying

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107 "Eminem; The Death of Slim Shady and the Recovery of Mr. Mathers," Culture Tease, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.culturetease.com/2011/01/eminem-the-death-of-slim-shady-and-the-recovery-of-mr-mathers/.
108 "Multiple Personalities: Mac Miller 'Delusional Thomas' | KCOU," accessed December 1, 2014, http://kcou.fm/multiple-personalities-mac-miller-delusional-thomas/.
109 Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 266.

them, utilizing her gender to critique the ludicrous ideals demanded by the industry which even its inclusionary participants cannot fully embody.

**Double Trouble: Alter Egos, Performance, and Paradox**

As Uri McMillan notes, Minaj's "métier is her skill at character itself, her execution of a dazzling array of multiple personalities."[110] Indeed, Minaj's alter egos are abundant, wacky, and complex, demonstrating a "quirky blend of artifice and alterity" that "ultimately rebukes hip-hop's obsession with authenticity."[111] If you strip away the neon ensembles and the eccentric accents, if you remove the invisible mask to seek out a glimpse of the actual human upon which these alter egos are built, what you find is a history far darker than what her quirky couture exoskeleton might suggest. On her 2008 track "Autobiography," Minaj raps about her drug-addicted father's attempt to burn down her home with her mother still inside.[112] Exposed to domestic violence and the harrowing consequences of addiction from a young age, Minaj created her first alter ego, whom she named "Cookie," as a way to escape her traumatizing environment.[113]

Minaj's current list of alter egos is extensive and diverse, including the vibrantly girlish and soft-voiced Harajuku Barbie; the wild (and Caucasian) gay male, Roman Zolanski; Roman's strict and traditional English mother, Martha Zolanski; and the overtly sexual Nicki Lewinsky, just to name a few. That Minaj frequently performs alter egos that exceed the boundaries of both her race and gender is significant and her ability to achieve success as a rapper while performing as these characters who would, in reality,

110 McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics," 80.
111 Ibid.
112 "The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj," Out Magazine, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.out.com/entertainment/music/2010/09/12/curious-case-nicki-minaj.
113 "Nicki Minaj - Biography - Rapper - Biography.com," Biography, accessed October 27, 2014, http://www.biography.com/people/nicki-minaj-579574.

be excluded almost immediately from hip-hop culture, speaks volumes about the ability for female masquerade to serve as "means of 'acting out' to become visible in a radical and socially potent way." [114]

That Minaj's first alter ego was born out of trauma, created for purposes of escapism and protection, is significant given the larger scope of her career and her navigation of racial and sexual politics in the hip-hop industry. Her alter egos allow her to speak from spaces she would otherwise be excluded from and give her the freedom to speak freely because she has the ability to write off anything controversial she says as merely a construct of one of her alter egos and therefore inauthentic. Minaj describes Roman as: "…a crazy boy who lives in me and says the things that I don't want to say…I think he was born out of rage so he bashes everyone…He's violent."[115] Minaj's alter egos are her get-out-of-jail-free card, her invitation to speak her mind without fear of backlash for speaking unwanted truths (or falsehoods, as her many identities make it difficult to discern fact from fiction).

In "For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," Jess Butler wonders how to make sense of Nicki Minaj's "performance of self that is simultaneously masculine and feminine, hypersexual and doll-like, vulnerable and hard."[116] Nicki's projected persona, from the array of Day-Glo wigs to her ambiguous sexuality to her eccentric alter egos, constantly contradicts itself and can be read as a performance of self, one which embraces its existence in the margins between polarized extremes. She is heavily criticized for her inauthenticity but her usage of artifice and alter

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114 Judith Bettelheim, "Women in Masquerade and Performance," African Arts 31, no. 2 (1998): 69, doi:10.2307/3337521.
115 Michael John Warren, Nicki Minaj: My Time Now, Documentary, (2010).
116 Butler, "For White Girls Only?," 36.

egos, upon closer examination, seems pointedly calculated and capable of providing her increased agency in an industry which, by nature, excludes her as an active participant.

However, her actions and alter egos, while arguably subversive, also prove problematic at times and her "bodily remixing presents just one productive trajectory of black female subjectivity in the face of the chaos and liminality that the future text affords."[117] While she may be subversive and critical of the sociocultural paradigm she resides in, she is also often complicit in some of the very shortcomings she critiques. She is a walking contradiction; she is a mouthpiece for empowering women but denies a feminist agenda, she criticizes misogyny and the objectification of women but salaciously flaunts her sexuality and caters to the production of pleasure for her male spectators.

Both implicitly and explicitly, Minaj is raising questions about what it means 'to be'—what it means to be a woman, to be authentic, to be sexual. This chapter aims to chart the trajectory of Minaj's career and examine how she actively positions herself as a site of contradiction and complexity in order to critique the heteronormative and misogynistic climate in hip-hop culture. Furthermore, visually, aurally, and lyrically, Nicki Minaj represents a "literal fracturing of postfeminist ideals"[118] and deconstructs notions of a truly authentic identity. Through a textual analysis of several of her music videos, it will become clear how Nicki Minaj is challenging racialized depictions of female sexuality and pushing the discursive boundaries of hip-hop culture and contemporary culture more broadly. Additionally, her shrewd manipulation of the affordances of femininity (and feminine masculinity, for that matter)—in conjunction

117 Nina Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations," Cinema Journal 53, no. 4 (2014): 153, doi:10.1353/cj.2014.0050.
118 Butler, "For White Girls Only?," 53.

with her re-appropriation of camp aesthetics and drag—allows her to function as a chameleon, re-fashioning her appearance, sexuality, and even her gender in order to gain increased agency and expose how identity—for all of us—is merely a performance. Minaj is the living embodiment of Judith Butler's concept that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[119] Though her "unabashed girlishness and scene-stealing theatricality" might appear to be reductive, Minaj's "glossy surfaces and quick-witted banter suggest, paradoxically, that—in Paul Gilroy's words—'to be inauthentic is sometimes the best way to be real.'"[120]

## "Queen Nicki Dominant, Prominent"[121]: Nicki Minaj's Rise to Fame

From the start, Minaj's career as a rapper reflects the problematic limitations placed on women in hip-hop culture. Her stage name—the name that has gained international recognition—is grounded in the idea that women in hip-hop are only significant for how they function within the context of male sexual desire. Early in her career, Minaj was signed to the Brooklyn label Dirty Money Entertainment.[122] Fendi, the CEO of Dirty Money, convinced her to drop her last name and adopt Minaj, the phonetic spelling of *ménage,*[123] because he said it "sounded better."[124] Her new stage name, imposed upon her by a male producer in a male-dominated industry, refers very explicitly to a sex act which is a frequently-cited male sexual fantasy. Minaj later told a Trinidadian

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119 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.
120Gilroy 1995, 29 qtd. In McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics," 86.
121 Nicki Minaj, Ariana Grande, and Jessie J, "Bang Bang", MP3 (Lava/Republic, 2014).
122 Meaghan Garvey, "From Struggle to Stardom: How Your Favorite Rappers Were Discovered - Nicki Minaj," E-magazine, Complex, (August 20, 2014), http://www.complex.com/music/2014/08/from-struggle-to-stardom-how-your-favorite-rappers-were-discovered/nicki-minaj.
123 From the ubiquitous French term for a three-way sexual interaction ménage à trois
124 Smith, "'Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian,'" 366.

newspaper that she hated the name and wanted to change it but, at that point, she was too far into the public eye to revert back to her birth name without tainting her reputation.[125] While a small anecdote, this incident is indicative of the challenges she would face as a woman in the rap industry.

Under Dirty Money Entertainment, Nicki Minaj was included on Fendi's street DVD series titled *Come Up*; it was her performance on *Come Up* that caught the eye of rapper Lil' Wayne and inspired a relationship between Wayne and Minaj that would open many doors for her.[126] In 2009, Young Money Entertainment[127] signed Minaj to the label,[128] partly due to Lil' Wayne's enthusiastic support of her talent. Minaj had worked her way into the game but she still had to play by the men's rules. A man brought her into the spotlight, a man gave her a name connecting her to misogyny and objectification, and her early work in the rap industry similarly required her to conform to the limited space allowed for a woman in a masculine sphere of performance and production. However, Minaj's lyrics and performance style suggest, even in her earliest work, a distinct disruption of the hypermasculine, misogynist spaces she inhabits.

In 2010, Minaj was featured—alongside hip-hop legends Jay-Z and Rick Ross—on Kanye West's track "Monster."[129] At this point in her career, Nicki Minaj had gained a decent amount of popular interest through her features on tracks by major popular

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125 Ibid.
126 Meaghan Garvey, "From Struggle to Stardom: How Your Favorite Rappers Were Discovered," Complex, August 20, 2014, http://www.complex.com/music/2014/08/from-struggle-to-stardom-how-your-favorite-rappers-were-discovered/
127 Young Money Entertainment also represents Lil' Wayne, as well as other well-known rap artists such as Drake and Tyga, who often collaborate on tracks with Minaj. ("Young Money Artists," Young Money Fansite, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.youngmoneyhq.com/artists/.)
128 "Nicki Minaj," Young Money Fansite, accessed October 30, 2014, http://www.youngmoneyhq.com/artists/nicki-minaj/.
129 Kanye West et al., "Monster", MP3, My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy (Roc-A-Fella, Def Jam, 2010).

artists but her appearance on "Monster" cemented her status as a rap icon. Critics heavily praised her verse and her performance in the controversial music video. Tom Breihan, writing for Pitchfork, said of Minaj:

> …[everything] fades into the background when Nicki Minaj shows up. Nicki's been a magnetic, polarizing, scene-stealing figure for something like a year, but her masterfully manic verse here feels like the moment where she becomes a full-on *star*, an undeniable force in rap. She's a whirlwind of energy, showing her full repertoire of nutso voices and kicking the living fuck out of the beat…. Nicki swallows the track whole.[130]

Rick Ross described Nicki's performance on "Monster" as "a moment of history", the moment in which he knew "she [is] one of the greatest."[131] In the span of a few years, Nicki Minaj went from underground rapper to an artist who was landing features on chart-topping tracks by big-name artists. Post-"Monster," Minaj demonstrated a rise to fame that was "breathtakingly swift, even by Warholian standards."[132] After she "outclassed her two heavyweight collaborators, Kanye West and Jay-Z [on "Monster"], Minaj solidified her permanence as "the queen of rap."[133] Suddenly, the biggest names in the rap game were jumping at the chance to be featured on her tracks.

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130 Tom Breihan, "Kanye West: 'Monster' [ft. Justin Vernon, Rick Ross, Jay-Z, and Nicki Minaj]," Pitchfork, September 7, 2010, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/11970-monster-ft-justin-vernon-rick-ross-jay-z-and-nicki-minaj/.

131 Shaheem Reid, "Rick Ross Says 'Monster' Proves Nicki Minaj Is 'One Of The Greatest,'" MTV News, September 27, 2010, http://www.mtv.com/news/1648837/rick-ross-says-monster-proves-nicki-minaj-is-one-of-the-greatest/.

132 Brent Staples, "Nicki Minaj Crashes Hip-Hop's Boys Club," The New York Times, July 7, 2012, sec. Opinion / Sunday Review, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/opinion/sunday/nicki-minaj-crashes-hip-hops-boys-club.html.

133Minaj refers to herself as "the Queen of Rap" on the remix of Beyoncé Knowles' hit song "Flawless". Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj, "Flawless (Remix) Feat. Nicki Minaj", MP3 (Parkwood, Columbia, 2014), http://flawless.beyonce.com.

With the release of her debut album, *Pink Friday,*[134] Minaj began to demonstrate a unique position straddling the rap and pop genres and, though her album debuted at number two[135] on the US Billboard 200 chart, selling 375,000 copies in its first week,[136] critics found her attempt to appeal to a commercial pop audience while simultaneously showcasing her talent as a rapper to fall short on both counts. Kitty Empire, writing for theguardian.com, said, "*Pink Friday* can't decide whether Minaj is a rapper or just another pop artist."[137] Allison Stewart of the Washington Post, however, applauded *Pink Friday* for its attempt to seek out "the monster hits to be found at the intersection of hip-hop and R&B" and praised its efforts to "reassure mainstream listeners that Minaj is a semi-proper girl with…feelings, not just a piranha with gymnastics flow."[138] Stewart noted the many examples of "Minaj trying on and ultimately discarding various personas the way Lady Gaga does platform shoes. She tries on voices, too, taking a scenic tour of Queens, London and Trinidad before settling on a Jamaican patois."[139] Despite its mixed critical reception, with *Pink Friday* (and its accompanying music videos and live performances), Minaj really hit her stride and cultivated her signature aesthetic which "consciously negotiates the ways in which she is racialized by shaping how she is coded

134 Nicki Minaj, Pink Friday, Studio Album (Young Money/Cash Money/Universal Motown, 2010).
135 Pink Friday came in second only to Kanye West's Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, an album to which Minaj was honored to take second place to. [insert quote from nightline]
136 Keith Caulfield, "Kanye West, Nicki Minaj Score Big Debuts on Billboard 200," Billboard, December 1, 2010, http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/950035/kanye-west-nicki-minaj-score-big-debuts-on-billboard-200.
137 Kitty Empire, "Nicki Minaj: Pink Friday – Review," The Guardian, November 20, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/21/nicki-minaj-pink-friday-review.
138 Allison Stewart, "Nicki Minaj: 'Pink Friday,'" The Washington Post, November 23, 2010, sec. Arts & Living, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/22/AR2010112208069.html.
139 Ibid.

in the media through transforming signifiers such as clothing, hair color, hair style, skin color, body weight, music, and, of course, her paramours."[140]

Minaj's second album, *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*[141] further demonstrates her attempt to negotiate the ambiguous void between pop and hip-hop, as well as the problematic space for articulations of femininity in both genres. Listening to *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* is almost like listening to two separate albums, one which is made up of girly, bubblegum pop and the other which consists of gritty, aggressive rap. Ann Powers, writing for NPR in a piece titled "Fractured Femmes: Madonna and Nicki Man Up," cites the "schizophrenic" nature of the album as "characteristic of a pop-cultural moment full of women splitting themselves down the middle, along the deeply embedded line between anima and animus. In film, television and fiction, as in pop, our favorite heroines don masculine garb to get things done, and then face inner crises when circumstances force them to go femme."[142] Powers continues:

> *Roman Reloaded* shows no attempt to connect Minaj's boldly intoned raps, full of fire and phallic references, to the strawberry-scented dance tracks she sings in a kitten yelp. Though many critics have accused Minaj of making these more 'girly' tracks for strictly commercial reasons, they do make a statement about femininity: that it's a form of drag as potentially ridiculous as the strap-on machismo of Roman.[143]

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140 Butler, "For White Girls Only?," 51.
141 Nicki Minaj, Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded, Studio Album (Young Money/Cash Money/Universal Republic, 2012).
142 Ann Powers, "Fractured Femmes: Madonna And Nicki Minaj Man Up," NPR.org, April 5, 2012, http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2012/04/05/150056215/fractured-females-madonna-and-nicki-minaj-man-up.
143 Ibid.

As Powers suggests, a woman in the public eye loses her agency when she exposes herself as vulnerable—emotionally or sexually. Minaj herself said in an interview: "…you have to be a beast. That's the only way they respect you."[144]

In *Feminine Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam writes, "…identity might best be described as a process with multiple sites for becoming and being."[145] Like many other contemporary female popstars, Nicki Minaj is confronted with a myriad of opinions and expectations about the type of woman she should be—demands that are often contradictory and impossible to live up to. In a candid video interview, Nicki, clearly frustrated, rants about the unrealistic expectations imposed upon the contemporary woman: "…When you're a girl, you have to be like… *everything*. You have to be… you have to be dope at what you do but you have to be super sweet. And you have to be sexy. And you have to be this and you have to be that and you have to be nice and it's like… I can't be all those things." She finishes by saying in her signature cartoonish drawl, "I'm a human being."[146]

Despite her claims here, Minaj has demonstrated over the course of her rise to fame that she indeed *can* be all of those things and it is her proclivity for artifice and feminine masquerade that enables her to embody an array of characters and speak from positions that she would not normally have access to in the hip-hop genre. Minaj is exploring, quite successfully, this notion of identity as a process that rejects totalities and seeks to blur the line between the 'real' and the performed, between femininity and

144 Rossalyn Warren, "Hear The Epic Speech Nicki Minaj Gives About Sexism In Her Industry (And Donald Trump)," Upworthy, March 14, 2014, http://www.upworthy.com/hear-the-epic-speech-nicki-minaj-gives-about-sexism-in-her-industry-and-donald-trump.
145 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 21.
146 Warren, "Hear The Epic Speech Nicki Minaj Gives About Sexism In Her Industry (And Donald Trump)."

masculinity, between black and white. Patricia Hill Collins argued that global mass media bears the authority to "shape perceptions of the world" through its circulation of images of Black femininity and masculinity and, through this process, simultaneously perpetuate (or disrupt) "ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class" that are prominent in popular culture.[147]

Given her prominent role in mass media and unique position as a female artist that simultaneously navigates the margins of 'pop' and hip-hop discourses, the implications of Minaj's use of alter-egos and what Uri McMillan refers to as 'nicki-aesthetics' are of the utmost importance to discuss, for they largely complicate notions of gender, sexuality, race, identity, and authenticity—issues that are so intertwined that to talk about them separately would be reductive and dismiss how thoroughly these concepts function reciprocally to produce our very notions of being. I will spend the rest of this chapter engaging in extensive textual analysis of several of Minaj's music videos in order to tease out how these concepts are constructed visually and how her articulations of race, gender, and sexuality vis-à-vis her performances reveal a keen awareness of her potential to disrupt the status quo and demonstrate how the distinctly underestimated powers of femininity and performativity can create new pathways for the marginalized via her very unique brand of pop feminism.

147 Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 122.

## Textual Analysis

*'5-Star Bitches': Minaj's Early Engagement with Gender Politics in Hip-Hop Music Videos*

One of Minaj's earliest music video appearances was as a featured artist (along with Gucci Mane and Trina) on rapper Yo Gotti's "5 Star (Remix)."[148] The 2009 music video positions Yo Gotti and Gucci Mane at the center of the diegesis; the camera focuses on them alternatively against a stark white background as they explicate their need for "a five-star bitch", a girl who they value solely for her beauty and sexual ability. Gucci Mane promises to "Pay her bills, get her hair fixed/Might even pay her rent/And the way she give it to me/Best money I ever spent." These lyrics position the women as object rather than subject, with no real responsibilities other than being attractive and pleasing their men in bed. Gucci Mane also hints at prostitution by suggesting he will provide monetary compensation in return for his girl's sexual performance.

The video sets Nicki Minaj and Trina up as passive "5-star bitches." Minaj, for the majority of the video, is relegated to the side, either dancing provocatively next to the men as they rap like a stereotypical 'video girl', silently waving around giant wads of money with a sultry smirk on her face or pictured (along with Trina) in star-shaped cutaways, inviting the viewer to leer at them and decide if they live up to the '5-star' rating. As demonstrated in the start of the video, Nicki Minaj appears to function within the themes of misogyny and sexual objectification explicated by Yo Gotti and Gucci Mane, falling into the stereotypical role of woman as an accessory who rarely has a voice

148 Rage, Yo Gotti - 5 Star (Remix) Ft. Gucci Mane, Trina, Nicki Minaj, Music Video, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04IyUQdOCaw&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

or any sense of agency. However, at the start of Minaj's verse, this illusion is ruptured as she usurps the "queen vs. ho dialectic" which "functions to create a boundary to exclude from 'safe spaces' those black women who choose to perform inappropriate black femininity."[149] Her exaggerated, comical facial expressions, coupled with the tonal shifts of her voice, which slide from girlish and chirpy into deep and guttural as she spits "Fendi on my slippers…I don't need help, I pay the bills on time/So I be yellin' fuck 'em, with a dildo sign", negates any notion of her as a passive "5-star bitch" who relies on a man for financial security and opens up a space in which women can be sexual and successful without being deemed a 'ho'.

*"You could be the king but watch the queen conquer": Female Agency, Dual Identities, and Queering the Gaze in "Monster"*[150]

In 2010, an unfinished version of the music video for Kanye West's "Monster" was leaked before its official release date and it was met with an uproar. The finished version of the video debuted on June 4, 2011, and was widely controversial.[151] The music video incorporates elements from the cinematic horror genre, alluding to *American Psycho* (2000)[152] and the series of Saw films, as well as visual aesthetics and elements of *mise-en-scène* that place it in the realm of the horror genre. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Linda Williams identifies both the horror and pornography genres as examples of what she calls 'body genres,' or cinematic genres which privilege the

149 Johnson, "Confessions of a Video Vixen," 195.
150 Jake Nava, Monster - Kanye West Ft. Jay-Z, Nicki Minaj, Bon Iver, Rick Ross, Music Video (Roc-A-Fella, Def Jam, 2011), http://vimeo.com/30364848.
151 MTV banned the video after women's rights activists Sharon Haywood and Melinda Tankard Reist gathered almost 5,000 signatures in a petition to have the video removed from major networks Lyndra Vassar, "Kanye West 'Monster' Video Banned on MTV," Essence.com, March 6, 2011, http://www.essence.com/2011/03/06/kanye-west-monster-video-banned-on-mtv-nicki-minaj-rick-ross-jayz.
152 Mary Harron, American Psycho, Crime, Drama, (2000).

spectacle of the body.[153] In both porn and horror, according to Williams, women function as the primary onscreen embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain, working off of the notion that spectators often experience the most powerful sensations via the onscreen depictions of the sexual 'saturation' of the female body.

The video begins with a disclaimer; white text over a black screen reads: "The following content is in no way to be interpreted as misogynistic or negative towards any groups of people. It is an art piece and it shall be taken as such."[154] This warning sets up the viewer to expect this 'sexual saturation' of the female figure and the video does not disappoint. The song begins and we see a scantily clad white model, hanged by a chain from the ceiling, followed by a black woman, also dead, swinging lifelessly in the wind as if the viewer is witnessing the aftermath of a lynching. If the title of the song was not enough of a suggestion, the first ten seconds of the video warn the viewer to prepare for the horror, violence, and gore ahead. Bon Iver's auto-tuned line, "Are you willing to sacrifice your life?" is heard on the soundtrack as "MONSTER" flashes onscreen in bold, blood red letters, followed by a piercing scream as the video cuts to a black female 'monster,' dressed in lingerie which does little to complement the horns protruding out of her face.

The relationship between the men and women of the video do little in favor of female agency, as the women are violently sexualized and either stripped of their agency by death or ostracized through their horrific disfigurations. The video begins with Rick Ross on a throne as nearly-nude corpses dangle from the ceiling, swinging slightly in the

153 Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Film Quarterly 44, no. 4 (July 1991): 2–13, doi:10.1525/fq.1991.44.4.04a00020.
154 Matthew Perpetua, "Kanye West Finally Releases 'Monster' Video," Rolling Stone, June 6, 2011, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/kanye-west-finally-releases-monster-video-20110606.

wind like macabre wind chimes. Kanye West is then depicted shirtless as disembodied female hands claw at his body through an iron gate, then later accompanied in bed by two scantily-clad female corpses whom he arranges to suit his pleasure. The scenes with West cut between the bedroom of the dead, the gate of disembodied hands, extreme close ups of Kanye's mouth as he raps, and Kanye rapping about his fame in front of a set of glass doors which barely hold back the crowd of zombies pressing their hands against the glass, trying to get to him.

Perhaps the most disturbing moment of the video is a shot in which Kanye, framed in a medium close up against a stone wall, nonchalantly rapping the hook as the camera tracks back to reveal the decapitated head of a brunette model in his hand as he grips her by the hair, a horrific spectacle the video highlights by then cutting to a close up of the severed head with her lifeless eyes as Kanye repeats, "Everybody knows I'm a motherfucking monster."

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Minaj's verse on "Monster" was widely praised and her performance in the video upheld the high standard set by her lyrical prowess on the track. Minaj begins her verse in a scene set in a castle dungeon. She is dressed in a revealing leather outfit complete with chains and a whip; her outfit, coupled with her gold fangs, marks her as a dominatrix vampire. Minaj begins her verse rapping with a hard, masculine tone to her voice, speaking through the mouth of Roman, and the music video emphasizes her manic facial expressions as she seductively circles a bound, hooded figure in a white dress as she raps:

> OK, first things first I'll eat your brains
> Then I'm a start rocking gold teeth and fangs

> Cause that's what a motherfucking monster do
> Hair dresser from Milan that's the monster do
> Monster Giuseppe heel, that's the monster shoe
> Young Money is the roster and a monster crew
> And I'm all up, all up, all up in the bank with the funny face
> And if I'm fake, I ain't notice cause my money ain't!

Minaj speaks the last line in a guttural, almost scream-like voice as she rips the hood off the bound figure, only to reveal that the hooded figure is another incarnation of Minaj. The Minaj under the hood, the pink-wigged figure in the chair, is also Minaj—Minaj as Barbie. Upon unhooding Nicki-as-Barbie, Nicki-as-Roman gets cuts off as Barbie raps in a cartoonishly bubbly and feminine voice: "So let me get this straight, wait, I'm the rookie?/But my features and shows ten times your pay?/50K for a verse, no album out?" The rest of the verse takes place as a dialogue between Roman and Barbie, who at times speak as if they are separate identities and at others, speak from a unified viewpoint as they simultaneously flaunt their status as rap "monsters" who can hold their own against the biggest names in the rap game.

Minaj's performance here is significant for a multitude of reasons. First, she is the only female in the music video who is allowed any agency, complicating the notion that the music video only allows women to fulfill roles of sexualized passivity. Linda Williams notes that, in horror films, there is often an oscillation between sadism and masochism that usually occurs in the moment in which the female victim abandons her passivity and actively turns on the monster. The interplay between Nicki-as-Roman (who is both male and representative of the 'monster') and Nicki-as-Barbie complicates the

prototypical portrayal of women in horror genres, while simultaneously disrupting the eroticized violence of the women who precede her in the video.

Furthermore, the music video sets up Minaj's scene as a site for the fulfillment of male fantasy and desire through Minaj's sexually aggressive, pseudo-lap dance on the hooded female in the chair. The male spectator of "Monster," through his 'determining male gaze' presumably projects his fantasy of a lesbian interaction between Minaj and the hooded female figure, only to have that fantasy thwarted when Minaj pulls the hood off and reveals the other figure to be *herself*. The active male spectator's gaze is destabilized as the passive objects of his sexual fantasy quickly morph into a doubly-active female subject who disrupts the gaze of the spectator and complicating the video's earlier depictions of women which rob them of agency and even life.

The video overwhelms the spectator with these horrific images of femininity—dangling corpses, ravenous zombies, maniacal werewolves, a naked corpse sandwiched between cushions on a couch. The distinct lack of feminine agency in the video could be viewed as problematic and misogynistic, further complicated by the fact that the females in the video are not only hypersexualized, but hypersexualized in such a perverse and violent way. Mikhail Lyubanksy, writing for Huffington Post, chastised the video for its message "that, whether awake or asleep, whether sober or drugged, whether conscious or not, women can be used for men's sexual gratification" and that "complete female passivity, lifelessness, and even death are erotic."[155]

155 Mikhail Lyubansky, "Did Kanye West Create A Monster?," Huffington Post, January 13, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mikhail-lyubansky/did-kanye-west-create-a-m_b_808507.html.

A surface reading of the music video might uphold these criticisms but, upon putting the depictions of both black and white femininity into a dialogue with the larger cultural context of the lyrics and, particularly, with Nicki Minaj's performance in the video, these claims of misogyny and racially-loaded imagery become de-stabilized. The lyrics of "Monster," coupled with the horror imagery and excessive depictions of sexualized violence function, to some extent, to acknowledge an awareness that their lifestyles and the fame they have achieved make these artists complicit in many of the sins associated with hip-hop culture. The artists continuously allude to their cultural prominence, respond to media criticism[156], diss other artists who have wronged them[157], and assert how they have all earned their places as 'monsters' in the industry. The self-reflexive nature of the song, which is essentially a giant metaphor for how these artists are navigating the uppermost regions of fame (and how they are coming to terms with the atrocities committed along the way), suggests a high level of awareness with regard to the music video and its treatment of violence and the sexualization of women.

These artists are aware that, despite their remarkable level of success, the machinations of the industry have, in many ways, turned them into anomalies who cannot relate to the human masses who worship them. Furthermore, Nicki Minaj's crucial role in the music video, as well as her complex dual performance, would suggest that these 'monsters' are trying to acknowledge the problematic treatment of women in hip-hop by

156 Kanye's "Gossip, gossip, nigga just stop it" can be read as a response to the media's ongoing negative portrayals of him which distract people from his music. Similarly, "I'm a need to see your fucking hands at the concert" can be read as Kanye acknowledging his flaws by owning the narcissism that he is often criticized for. Minaj similarly responds to her critics, using lines like "And if I'm fake, I ain't notice cause my money ain't" and the sarcastically-spoken "Forget Barbie, fuck Nicki cause she's fake" to suggest the criticism she gets for her artifice doesn't faze her in the slightest.

157 Jay-Z's lines about "vampires and bloodsuckers" and ""these niggas I made millionaires" are a direct call-out to former associates of his who have wronged him; Likewise, Minaj's "So let me get this straight, wait, I'm the rookie?/But my features and my shows ten times your pay?" and "Just killed another career, it's a mild day" are pointed digs at other female rappers, Lil' Kim, in particular.

taking the hypersexualization and violence to the extreme in order to spark a discourse. The Bon Iver lyrics which bookend the song (particularly "Oh just another lonely night/Are you willing to sacrifice your life?" and the chilling repetition of "I've crossed the line/And I'll let God decide" in the outro) seem to solidify "Monster" as incredibly self-aware and calculated with what it is doing in the music video. I would argue that the treatment of women in "Monster" is not a mere perpetuation of misogynistic and racially reductive depictions of women but rather, a parody of excess, which acknowledges the manner in which the hip-hop industry marginalizes and objectifies women and holds Minaj up in the video as a beacon of progress and a demonstration of the space for duality and female artifice she has created within the industry.

*"Lil' Freak": Camp Aesthetics and Queer Desire*

In "A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Black Femmecee," Savannah Shange notes how Nicki Minaj functions as an artist whose "complex assemblage of public personae functions as a sort of 'bait and switch' on the laws of normativity, where she appears to perform as 'straight' or 'queer,' while upon closer examination, she refuses to be legible as either."[158] Nicki Minaj is known for her sexually explicit lyrics and hypersexualized image; however, through the course of her career, her articulations of sexuality have been largely inconsistent. Early in her career, Minaj was openly bisexual but as her career progressed, she began to deny her bisexuality and skirt the topic of sexual preference in interviews while explicitly expressing both heterosexual and homosexual desire in the lyrics of her songs. As Marquita R. Smith notes, "Her

158 Savannah Shange, "A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Black Femmecee," Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 29, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2014.901602.

varied responses to questions about her sexuality demonstrate Minaj's awareness and manipulation of her audience. She has toyed with her public image enough to reassure her male fan base of her heterosexuality while also giving an air of inclusivity for queer fans."[159]

Minaj's ambiguous sexuality allows her to function within the heteronormative hip-hop sphere—literally and metaphorically—as a double. She is a site for homosexual desire *and* homosexual desire without being tied to either. She is an icon for women without scaring away her less-evolved male fans with claims of feminism. The aspects of Nicki Minaj that make her a problematic and complex sociocultural figure are the very same aspects that render her such a powerful and subversive one. Nina Cartier speaks of the black woman's process of becoming as one which "remains continual…her body, a floating signifier, [that] drifts easily back and forth through past, present, and future, making her a future text and the black man—the moment he becomes stabilized through patriarchy—transhistorical."[160] Cartier notes how Minaj, although she is at times problematic through her occupation of the "ultimate space of liminality" in which we do not know "whether she is bisexual or straight" or even "which Minaj we are getting, given her multiple and sometimes colliding alter egos,"[161] is nonetheless expanding the space of what can be allowed for "black female representation by eschewing the game of respectability altogether and casting the tropes of black female representation aside."[162]

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159 Smith, "'Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian,'" 390.
160 Here, Cartier is drawing from Alondra Nelson's notion of the "future text" as texts which "excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future," texts which "proffer new paradigms for black women, particularly to re-present and create anew the 'black' in popular culture." Nelson, 1-15, qtd. in Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts," 152-3.
161 Ibid., 153.
162 Ibid., 154.

Minaj's problematic yet promising female agency can be seen in moments which highlight her de-stabilizing of heteronormative and patriarchal structures of visuality. A notable example is the music video from Usher's 2010 song "Lil' Freak" which features Nicki Minaj. Lyrically, the song centers around Usher's desire for a three-way sexual experience with his girl (Nicki) and a second female who Nicki must lure into bed with them if she is to prove her loyalty to Usher. Minaj's role, both in the lyrics and in the visuals, seems to be contradictory and complex. In the video, Minaj sports a wig that is half black and half white (reminiscent of the black versus white color play in the "Monster" video) and Savannah Shange notes how this "Cruella de Ville wig" is a "suggestive visual accompaniment to her dual role in the narrative as a queer femme initiator on the one hand, and a minion of Usher's patriarchal sexuality on the other."[163] The gender relations and sexuality at play in the video are complex and play nicely with Minaj's ambiguous sexuality and general slipperiness as a subject for examination. Shange notes how the verbal and visual deployments of Minaj's 'queerness', when analyzed in tandem, allow us a better glimpse of how she strategically maneuvers herself as a potentially queer subject.

At its core, this song is about Usher. He is the headlining artist on the track, he opens and closes the song, and he is the narrative protagonist who commands Nicki to do his bidding as he "narrates homosex as prelude to his own satisfaction" and "positions himself as the 'true' target of female desire."[164] However, visually, the video constructs Usher in a way that almost relegates him to a role of subordinate passivity. He sings:

If you're fucking with me

163 Shange, "A King Named Nicki," 35.
164 Ibid., 35–36.

Really fucking with me
You go get some girls and bring them to me
If you fucking with me
Really fucking with me
You let her put her hands in your pants
Be my lil' freak

His words are commanding, demanding his girl to do as he orders. However, the music video portrays him as stagnant, waiting for his girl to come back to him. Minaj dominates the space of the music video and never even appears in the frame with Usher, instead prowling the cavernous club and seducing the young girl with excitement, as if she has completely forgotten her duty to bring this girl to Usher. "By goading the imagined erotic interest to have sex with Minaj, Usher's lyrics attempt to further de-queer homosexual contact by dragging it under the rubric of male desire and control[165]" but the visuals of the video leave Usher forgotten and off to the side, with women fawning over him as he waits impatiently for the two he actually wants to return.

Meanwhile, Nicki appears smitten with the young woman she is pursuing, seductively kissing her as she goes into her verse which seems to focus almost exclusively on her homosexual desire, with a mention of Usher almost as an afterthought. Minaj quips, "I'm looking for a cutie/A real big ole' ghetto booty….I keep a couple hoes/Like Santa, I keep a vixen…The girls want a Minaj yeah they wetter than a rain man/Usher buzz me in, Everybody loves Raymond." Usher has made Minaj the arbiter of his sexual desire but her words and position within the video's diegesis seem to indicate that Usher has gone from being part of a three-way to being a third wheel as Minaj

165 Ibid., 36.

fulfills her homosexual desire and leaves him begging, futilely, for her to be his "lil' freak."

Nicki Minaj consistently demonstrates queerness that denies legibility and in her homo- and hetero-sexual exploits, Minaj reveals her sexuality to be "yet another strategy for black female survivance that bends the rules of neoliberal capital without breaking them." Through her manipulation of her gender and sexual performance, Minaj's "hypervisibility as a black femmecee and her refusal to cede to any regime of recognition confound the multiple common sense—hip hop/patriarchy/heteronormativity—that seek to produce her as a compliant subject."[166]

## Conclusion

The trajectory of her career as female rapper demonstrates an astute navigation of the gender politics of a rigidly restrictive industry that perpetuates inequality. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* bell hooks discusses how Tina Turner appropriated "the wild woman pornographic myth of black female sexuality created by men" in a patriarchal society and notes how Turner "exploits [this myth] for her own ends to achieve economic self-sufficiency."[167] Like Turner, the evolution of Minaj's career has similarly conveyed the idea that "happiness and power come to women who learn to beat men at their own game, to throw off any investment in romance and get down to the real dog-eat-dog thing."[168]

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166 Ibid., 42.
Shange, "A King Named Nicki," 35.
Smith, "'Or a Real, Real Bad Lesbian,'" 390.
167 hooks, Black Looks, 69.
168 Ibid.

One need only look at how her visual representation in music videos has evolved over time to see how she has established credibility and a unique aesthetic which utilizes the very thing that originally marginalized her—her gender and sexuality—to critique the restrictive patriarchal and heteronormative attitudes the are prevalent not just in hip-hop culture but contemporary culture as a whole. This previously unknown woman—with her rainbow of wigs and fake eyelashes and eccentric fashion ensembles—stuns her audience when she opens her neon-painted lips and spits lyrical fire like the best rappers in the business. The juxtaposition of her excessively feminine (and artificial) appearance and sexualized body with her unabashedly vulgar and sexually explicit lyrics, delivered in a performance style that reproduces the masculine braggadocio of her male contemporaries, represents a violation of hip-hop aesthetics and a disruption of the patriarchal system at hand in the rap world. Her now-signature performance style and aesthetic demonstrates a "determination to steer a different, and *weirder,* course in a genre known for its taut conformity" and "refuses its constitutive element—a street savvy authenticity, or 'realness'—in favor of girly artifice."[169]

169 McMillan, "Nicki-Aesthetics," 80.

# Chapter 3

## Beyonce, Nicki, and Gaga: Fan Reception, Female Agency, and Subversion

I have spent my previous chapters engaging with two women—Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj—in order to demonstrate how these women represent a cultural moment of women 'splitting themselves down the middle' and using performativity, artifice, and feminine masquerade to achieve greater agency and, through their subversive acts, bring feminist discourse into popular culture. Through textual analysis, I have demonstrated how the visual representations of these pop stars in these music videos function to raise questions about gender, race, sexuality, and identity. My discussion of these women also begs a much larger—and much more complicated—array of questions concerning the efficacy of these subversive depictions of femininity on the audience that engages with these media texts. Does the audience consuming these music videos understand the disruptive potential of how these pop stars construct themselves as female agents? How is female agency achieved? Does agency lie in the ability to speak or in the ability for one's voice to be heard? How does the medium through which these artists are consumed come to bear on the reception of their message? And finally, given the participatory nature of the digital age, how do fans and audiences interact with the cultural products of these artists and how do these interactions transform their cultural meaning?

Though I will undoubtedly be unable to answer these questions, I do hope to provide additional insight into how agency functions and relates to hegemonic power structures and how these female agents come to have an impact—or perhaps fail to have

an impact—on the audiences which consume their creations. One way through which I hope to provoke insight is through the use of a term coined by Nicholas Mirzoeff called "countervisuality." In Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look*, the author addresses a central tension between visuality, which "sutures authority to power and renders this association 'natural,'"[170] and countervisuality, or "the right to look," which represents not just a different way of seeing or looking at images but the tactics needed to dismantle the visual strategies of the hegemonic system. Countervisuality confronts authority's narrow construction of reality by imagining and then asserting its alternative, a process that can be read as an "attempt to reconfigure visuality as a whole."[171]

Though it may seem like a strange connection, Mirzoeff's concept of visuality and countervisuality is key to my discussion of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj,[172] particularly due to its influence on how power relationships are constructed between brand, star, and audience in the digital era. I am focused specifically on the music videos of these women, which are usually consumed via YouTube. I would argue that the affordances of YouTube encourage audience participation and fan discourse that functions as a type of countervisuality. This concept of countervisuality will be something I return to later in this piece but is worth mentioning now, as it serves as the framework for how to make sense of the ways in which these popstars and their fans interact and, through this interaction, make cultural products meaningful.

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170 Nicholas Mirzoeff, The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.
171 Ibid., 24.
172 And, by her association with Beyoncé, Lady Gaga.

## Female Agency and Subversion

From here, it is imperative to delve briefly into a discussion of agency in order to glean a clearer understanding of what it means to have agency as a female and how female agents achieve subversion. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Judith Butler notes that "the agency denoted by the performativity of 'sex' will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes."[173] Here Butler points out the ultimate paradox of female agency, which she refers to as *assujetissement*, or "the paradox of subjectivation." According to Butler, the paradox of subjectivation is

> …precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.[174]

Female agency can only exist within the boundaries of preexisting power structures, never fully subverting those structures but functioning within them in order to gradually re-shape them over time. As Helga Druxes notes, agency is a "sustained and varied reshaping of power relations from which the agent can never free herself. While acting, we are at the same time acted upon; we are implicated in and help to reproduce even through our innovative interventions a whole network of social norms."[175]

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173 Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.
174 Ibid.
175 Helga Druxes, Resisting Bodies: The Negotiation of Female Agency in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction, Kritik : German Literary Theory and Cultural Studies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 13.

Forever fighting within the system that binds her, the female agent has little capacity for social change on her own, for subversion cannot be accomplished by the "lone heroic subject" but by the persistent, albeit small, acts of subversion enacted by a community of female agents over a period of time. Beyoncé Knowles and Nicki Minaj are both fascinating and complex subjects who carry immense cultural currency and the ability to broadcast their content to a shockingly expansive number of people. Each woman presents the academic with opportunity for vast scholarly engagement and I was often tempted to focus on just one of these women as the subject of my thesis. However, to only engage with one woman is to ignore the ways in which subversive female agency functions and also to overlook what appears to be a larger cultural moment of women eschewing normative depictions of femininity and sexuality and bringing feminist issues to the fore of pop culture.

Helga Druxes notes how the female agent can perceive and react to her problematic place within a power network but it is only through her engagement and knowledge of others who have shared her experience of alienation before a community can be formed. Community formation, according to Druxes, is stimulated by "increased verbalization, which inevitably seeks out its own interlocutors. Verbalizing on its own does not constitute innovative agency; nonetheless, it is a conscious activity that presupposes the give-and-take of community and can be the germ of a communal agenda." [176] What these women are doing is verbalizing their own alienation and finding confirmation in each other and in their fans, forming a community of female agents with the potential to re-shape attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

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176 Ibid., 14.

## YouTube and the Relationship Between Old and New Media: It's Complicated

As Marshall McLuhan famously said, "The medium is the message."[177] It would seem negligent to ignore the medium which houses the music videos I have been examining, as the very nature of the media platform through which they are consumed drastically shapes and transforms what these music videos—and what their authors—are trying to say and how those messages are received. In a post-MTV era, the music video has found a new, much more chaotic home—YouTube. While YouTube is not the only place you can find music videos, it is undoubtedly the most common place that people turn to in order to find them. The music video experience as we know it has changed. Gone are days of the music video spectator, cushioned in isolation on his couch as he stares at his television screen passively. YouTube creates communities, placing others on the proverbial couch on which you now sit, watching Beyoncé run the world.

The way we consume all media, including music videos, is evolving with technology and with that evolution follows a transformation in structures of power. Long gone is the reign of the big, bad 'mass media,' long gone is the 'passive' viewer who is disengaged from the images that parade past onscreen. YouTube is a perfect example of a breakdown in media power relations. In their examination of YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green note how YouTube is "symptomatic of a changing media environment," one where "the practices and identities associated with cultural production and consumption, commercial and non-commercial enterprise, and professionalism and

177 Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (Gingko Press, 2003).

amateurism interact and converge in new ways."[178] YouTube is entangled in a complicated relationship with mainstream media, both economically and in terms of content. Furthermore, YouTube, which functions simultaneously as "a high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network,"[179] demonstrates daily how its role as a hub for participatory practices and culture is significantly reshaping how we think about and understand contemporary media.

Social networking sites like YouTube have forced media entities to re-think their business strategies and foster a new type of relationship between brands and consumers, one that shifts from a model of distribution to one of circulation. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins terms this new brand/consumer relationship as part of a larger ideology of "affective economics," a "new configuration of marketing theory…which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions."[180] Jenkins notes how media companies understand the importance of taking interest in the qualities of audience experience but the bottom-line economic pressures often distract them from the economic side of affective economics—that is, "the need to quantify desire, to measure connections…commodify commitments, and transform all of the above into a return on investment."[181]

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178 Jean Burgess et al., YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture, 1 edition (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 90.
179 Jean Burgess et al., YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture, 1 edition (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 5.
180 Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, Revised edition (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 61–62.
181 Ibid., 62.

This shift in how media is produced and consumed creates agency for the audience; new participatory forms of cultural production are emerging on Web 2.0 that enable the audience to look back at the media producers and demand that they acknowledge—and transform—the content they produce to suit the audience's needs. Agnese Vellar, working off of Jenkins, claims that big media brands are now attempting to create content that will act as both "cultural attractors and activators"[182] which serve to build loyal, emotionally engaged fans who will be active in the promotion of their brand. Cultural attractors seek to gather a community of people with similar interests and tastes and cultural activators prompt their fans to actively do something related to the brand, like create their own response videos or organize a promotional campaign. By creating content that acts simultaneously as a cultural attractor and activator,

> …companies give consumers both something to talk about and also the cultural references that enable consumers to talk through their contents. When consumers are emotionally involved, they appropriate and re-create the professionally produced contents; they share the reworked material and comment upon the brand online. They thus become brand evangelists working as grassroots marketers.[183]

As you can see, this process of interaction between media producer and consumer is complex; as the media producers simultaneously attempt to incorporate audience feedback and participation into their content, there is also something manipulative in this system which seeks to make the audience do the marketing dirty work without even realizing it.

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182 Agnese Vellar, "Spreading the Cult Body on YouTube: A Case Study of 'Telephone' Derivative Videos," Transformative Works and Cultures 9 (March 30, 2012), doi:10.3983/twc.v9i0.313.
183 Ibid.

## The Public Sphere of Images and the Formation of Counterpublics

On YouTube, there exists a tension between commercialism and democratic exchange, exemplified by the blurred relationship between media producers and consumers. As Burgess and Green point out, YouTube carries a potential civic role as a cultural public sphere but this is put in tension with the fact that the site is privately owned and seeks to generate revenue. Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of the public sphere, described as an area of social life in which people could come together publicly and discuss societal problems and hopefully influence political action. According to Habermas, "the world of letters enable[ed] 'private people' to come together as a public [and] debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor."[184]

Habermas' public sphere was grounded in print culture and the literacy of the public but as Kirsten Pullen notes, in contemporary culture, "…as cell phone cameras, surveillance videos and self-made digital recordings proliferate," the literacy of the public "increasingly includes the ability to produce and read images as well as words."[185] The proliferation of images in contemporary culture has created a highly literate public; after being passively inundated with images for so long, I would argue that digital media has enabled the public to participate more actively in the public sphere of images by

184 Jürgen. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 27.
185 Kirsten Pullen, "If Ya Liked It, Then You Shoulda Made a Video Beyoncé Knowles, YouTube and the Public Sphere of Images," Performance Research 16, no. 2 (June 2011): 146, doi:10.1080/13528165.2011.578846.

demonstrating their media competency through social networking sites, particularly on YouTube.

In *Towards a Sociology of Information Technology*, Saskia Sassen argues that "…electronic space is inflected by the values, cultures, power systems, and institutional orders within which it is embedded."[186] However, the shaky translation of media structures that has been transposed onto YouTube and upset by participatory culture (and the tension that arises between the commercial and democratic facets of YouTube) present a breeding ground for subversive action and the formation of counterpublics. Michael Warner defines counterpublics as:

> …groups who are aware of their subordinate status but claim public space and enter public debate through the same mechanisms as those groups generally recognized to be part of 'the public.' In particular, counterpublics attempt to transform public space and public life by bringing forward concerns (especially about gender and sexuality) that were previously understood to be private.[187]

The participatory nature of YouTube creates opportunity for the formation of counterpublics through its encouragement—through cultural attractors and activators—of derivative videos which transform the original content and allow the content to be performed by individuals who may fall outside of those traditionally represented in music videos.

I realize that I have strayed from my two women, my dynamic duo of pop feminists, and I feel it prudent at this point to re-focus on their work (and the work of their fans) in order to further underscore YouTube's ability to facilitate the formation of

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186 Saskia Sassen, "Towards a Sociology of Information Technology," Current Sociology 50, no. 3 (May 1, 2002): 370, doi:10.1177/0011392102050003005.
187 Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics (Zone Books, 2002), 114–119.

counterpublics and, specifically through the fans of Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga, create counterpublics that are internalizing and expanding on the pro-feminist, pro-LGBT messages perpetuated by these women.

## Derivative Videos and the Formation of Counterpublics

### *Single Ladies*

To begin with, I will take a look at Beyoncé's iconic *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*.[188] At the time this was written, the official music video for "Single Ladies" on Beyoncé's Vevo channel on YouTube had an astonishing 366,260,090 views. The video is iconic, spawning thousands of imitations by celebrities, professional dancers, and amateurs alike. With a song that has been likened to Aretha Franklin's "Respect" for its cultural prominence and themes of female empowerment, Beyoncé "unleashed a phenomenon that has become the first major dance craze both of the new millennium and the Internet."[189] Beyoncé wanted the video to feature choreography that anyone could do and, indeed, the thousands of YouTube videos that flooded the internet as a response indicated that she was successful at her goal. Men, women, and children, black and white, people of all shapes and sizes turned the camera on themselves to record their own version of "Single Ladies."

This message of female empowerment, of a women who stands up and embraces her independence separate of a man, was demonstrated and embodied by thousands, if not millions, across the globe. On November 15, 2008, Justin Timberlake did a famous

188 Beyoncé Knowles, Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It), Dir. Jake Nava, Music Video (Columbia Records, 2008), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m1EFMoRFvY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
189 Trish Crawford, "Beyonce's Single an Anthem for Women," The Toronto Star, January 23, 2009, http://www.thestar.com/life/2009/01/23/beyonces_single_an_anthem_for_women.html.

reenactment of the video, leotard and all, on an episode of *Saturday Night Live*.[190] President Obama also demonstrated the "Single Ladies" hand wave on January 18, 2009, just days before his inauguration.[191] Most of the videos, though, are amateur dancers, every day men and women, in their own domestic spaces imitating this dance tied to female empowerment.

As Kirsten Pullen notes, by using the "YouTube dance archive to compare different dancing bodies" the user is able to "recognize and highlight how racial, classed or sexual counterpublics mobilize dance."[192] Pullen further notes the large number of queer dancers who made "Single Ladies" derivatives and offered non-traditional dancing bodies which directly contrasted the hyper-masculine, heterosexual themes that dominate most R&B music.

By examining these derivative fan videos and the comments that accompany them on YouTube, we can see how these media artifacts "challenge and recite norms of blackness, femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality."[193] *Single Ladies* is also important for the contradictions it poses to analysis. First, its proliferation across many platforms which featured a wide variety of dancing bodies "suggest how even corporate-produced and –distributed media products belong to a public sphere of images"[194] and demonstrates the confusing relationship between corporate-produced media and the audiences who consume and re-appropriate said media.

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190 Jason Richards, "So Long, 'Single Ladies': A Retrospective," Vulture, accessed December 12, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2010/06/so_long_single_ladies_a_retros.html.
191 Ibid.
192 Pullen, "If Ya Liked It, Then You Shoulda Made a Video Beyoncé Knowles, YouTube and the Public Sphere of Images," 147.
193 Ibid., 148.
194 Ibid., 145.

Secondly, the widespread popularity of *Single Ladies* reconfigures the relationship between star and audience; after the video became a viral sensation, Beyoncé announced a contest for the best imitation videos and the reward was that she would feature the winning videos onscreen during her 2009 "I Am…" world tour.[195] Through the affordances of YouTube and its participatory nature, the fan is able to tap into the accessibility of the star figure and create a relationship in which media is shared and consumed in both directions.

Finally, the *Single Ladies* phenomenon also demonstrates the slippery slope of progressive/subversive representations of race, class, and gender, which can often be misread as regressive. In Pullen's words:

> …the fact that Beyoncé is a black woman with an especially curvy figure allows viewers to activate racist fantasies of hypersexual black femininity. The liberatory potential of a counterpublic enabled by digital media must always be tempered with the recognition of not only its consumerism but also its potentially regressive representations of race, class, and gender.[196]

*Telephone*

As my second example, I would like to revisit the music video for Lady Gaga's collaboration with Beyoncé in *Telephone*.[197] In "Spreading the Cult Body on YouTube: A Case Study of "Telephone" Derivative Videos," Agnese Vellar, working off of Henry Jenkins' term "spreadable media," describes spreadable videos as those "multimedia productions that fulfill their viewers' communicative and creative needs and stimulate

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195 "Beyonce's 'Single Ladies' Dance Contest: The Clock Is Ticking!," EW.com, accessed December 12, 2014, http://popwatch.ew.com/2009/02/26/beyonce-single/.
196 Pullen, "If Ya Liked It, Then You Shoulda Made a Video Beyoncé Knowles, YouTube and the Public Sphere of Images," 148.
197 Lady Gaga and Jonas Åkerlund, Lady Gaga - Telephone Ft. Beyoncé.

those viewers to redistribute and re-create the primary text."[198] Vellar goes on to note how the Gaga 'brand' incorporates aspects from multiple cultural codes to order to meet the needs of different target markets as a cultural attractor and stimulate appropriation by fans as a cultural activator. Specifically, Gaga is constructed in such a way as to target audiences in music culture, re-appropriating elements from pop icons like Madonna and David Bowie. Gaga also has been constructed to act as a cultural attractor and activator for the LGBT community; she purposefully played her earliest shows in gay bars and has publicized her commitment to LGBT rights.

In *Fan Cultures*, Matthew Hills identifies two types of media cult. First is the cult text, which is a fictional product which incorporates aspects of auteurism, an endlessly deferred narrative, and hyperdiegetic formulations.[199] The second is the cult body, a media figure who embodies previously subcultural codes that are well-suited to being reenacted.[200] Gaga and Beyoncé, both with international fame and notoriety, act as a cult body, one which "simultaneously empower[s] the identity" that the duo represents and "construct[s] it as a target market."

The music video for *Telephone* was released in early 2010 and immediately became a sensation. The music video clocks in at nine minutes, thirty seconds, and exhibits a narrative and style that is reminiscent of cinema, made all the more poignant by the music video's references to Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. I* (2003)[201] and *Pulp Fiction* (1994)[202], as well as Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991).[203] Following the

198 Vellar, "Spreading the Cult Body on YouTube."
199 Matthew Hills, Fan Cultures (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).
200 Ibid.
201 Tarantino, Kill Bill.
202 Quentin Tarantino, Pulp Fiction, Crime, Drama, Thriller, (1994).

parameters of Matthew Hills, Gaga's *Telephone* music video can be read as a postmodern cult text which re-appropriates elements of narrative cinema and, "by integrating cinematic references and mimicking the culture body of postfeminism heroines," the music video also "seeks to attract both members of chick culture and fans of postmodern cinema, who gain pleasure from decoding cinematic references."[204]

The video is also rife with product placement to the point of excess, thus locating the video within a postfeminist discourse where the gendered body and consumerism converge, simultaneously capitalizing on the fashion industry with product placement and yet mocking it by taking it to the extreme where "boundaries between gendered identity, pop art, and commodity culture are blurred."[205]

The music video's status as postmodern cult text expresses a distinct intermedia and intertextual awareness; the video, which serves as a diegetic extension of "Paparazzi," contributes to Gaga's ongoing metacommentary on stardom and fame, also incorporating Beyoncé's own feminist agenda into the mix. Lady Gaga said in an interview with *E! Online*:

> There was this really amazing quality in 'Paparazzi,' where it kind of had this pure pop music quality but at the same time it was a commentary on fame culture. In its own way, even at certain points working with Jonas Åkerlund, the director of both videos, really achieved this high art quality in the way that it was shot. I wanted to do the same thing with this video—take a decidedly pop song, which on the surface has a quite shallow meaning, and turn it into something deeper.[206]

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203 Ridley Scott, Thelma & Louise, Adventure, Crime, Drama, (1991).
204 Vellar, "Spreading the Cult Body on YouTube."
205 Ibid.
206 "The Hidden Meaning of Lady Gaga's 'Telephone,'" March 14, 2010, http://vigilantcitizen.com/musicbusiness/the-hidden-meaning-of-lady-gagas-telephone/.

*Telephone* spawned a large number of fan derivatives which ranged from imitation of the choreography, parody videos, makeup and hairstyling tutorials to recreate the looks seen in the video, flash mobs featuring the choreography from the vide, and audiovisual mashups. In this way, *Telephone* is not only creating counterpublics by targeting audiences from gay, feminist, and postmodern cultures, but also encouraging its viewers to not just replicate the video but adapt it to create new audiovisual genres. As Vellar notes, "Gaga has become the killer application of YouTube because she performs her celebrity persona as a postfeminist and gay-friendly cult body that can easily be appropriated by different social groups active on YouTube."[207]

As with *Single Ladies*, the case of *Telephone* astutely demonstrates the open-ended but highly contradictory relationship between media consumer, media entity, and the higher powers that construct and distribute the media entity. Beyoncé and Gaga are both remarkable and innovative with how they construct and modify their feminine personae by seeking inspiration from past celebrities. Upon encouragement, "YouTube users mimic [their] cult [bodies] with both expressive and commercial intent." Beyoncé and Gaga then redistributes their fans' videos through their own media outlets, simultaneously fostering a more intimate relationship with their fan bases and exploiting the bodies of their own fans. But, in keeping with power structures at hand in the media industry, the "digital profiles—and thus identities—of [their] fans are in danger because YouTube has the right to remove them for copyright infringement if fans share soundtracks without the permission of the rightful owners."[208]

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207 Vellar, "Spreading the Cult Body on YouTube."
208 Ibid.

## Conclusion

*Fan Derivative Videos as Countervisuality*

> Michael Warner said of counterpublics:
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> One of the most striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency. Not only is participation understood as active, at the level of the individual whose uptake helps to constitute a public, it is also sometimes possible to attribute agency to the virtual corporate entity created by the space of circulation as a whole.[209]

Just as Druxes noted earlier, the agency lies in the collective, not in the heroic actions of the individual. Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj are not singlehandedly re-shaping cultural attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and identity in popular culture. However, they are creating a discourse within which both the mainstream public, and counterpublics in particular, are included and encouraged to participate. Fan videos demonstrate not just a re-appropriation of existing content but a larger practice of YouTube users innovating audiovisual languages and canons and constructing their own fame.

YouTube—and new media in general—is creating a culture that is more connected, more inclusive with the creation of smaller counterpublics by bringing together people who would not normally engage in dialogue with one another. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated, the YouTube era is largely indicative of the shifting, unsteady power dynamics at play in music video culture that leave these pop stars—and their audiences, by extension—with wiggle room through which to spread messages that might not be wholly subversive but are nonetheless crucial to sparking

209 Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," Public Culture 14, no. 1 (2002): 88.

new communities and discourses. Nicholas Mirzoeff claims that the right to look is not about seeing:

> …It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails…The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity...there is an exchange, but no creation of a surplus. You, or your group, allow another to find you, and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself.[210]

YouTube could be read as a facilitator of countervisuality, giving its users the right to look and disrupt the systems of power in place. In the MTV era, the media entities that governed the pop star held a unilateral power over the audience. The star gazed into the camera and at the audience by extension as she performed her piece, relegating the viewer to a passive role and eschewing a sensation of collectivism. Fan videos (and the encouragement by pop icons like Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Nicki Minaj) reject the unilateral visuality represented by old media power structures. YouTube and the way these women utilize their music videos within the participatory culture of YouTube, in a way, allow for this act of countervisualization by giving the fan the right to look, the right to gaze into the camera and perform under the gaze of Beyoncé or Gaga, thereby thwarting, to some extent, the dominant power structures put in place by the music industry giants.

Furthermore, whether or not the audience picks up on the subversive messages of these videos, whether or not there is an explicit acknowledgement of the feminist themes that pervade these videos, the imitation and re-appropriation of these videos demonstrates

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210 Mirzoeff, The Right to Look, 1.

that the audience literally embodies the message the videos attempt to convey. Maybe it is a subconscious internalization but these fans are literally re-creating and disseminating these messages that disrupt heteronormative, hegemonic ways of thinking about gender, sexuality and culture.

Michel de Certeau argued that the possibility of resisting dominant ideologies lies in the use of commodities imposed upon the public by capitalism.[211] Any commodity can be resistant and the cultural commodity "need not be explicitly subversive to be consumed in counter-hegemonically productive ways."[212] I set out to think about questions of agency and subversion as demonstrated by these women. Are they utilizing their amplified female agency in order to act as subversive agents, disrupting the status quo? I would argue that, given the many contradictions and nuances in constructions of power surrounding these women, they are not wholly subversive but that they are indeed proffering content that can be consumed in counter-hegemonically productive ways.

They all embrace the contradictions and doubleness that go along with being mega-popstars signed to massive labels while simultaneously trying to disseminate messages that run in contrast to mainstream ideology. By engaging with their fans as they do, even if the fans are not that aware, the relationship between the star entity and her audience facilitates countervisuality and creates counterpublics that demonstrate the efficacy, at least to a degree, of the subversion that these women are striving for. Through their music videos and their engagement with their fans through YouTube and other social networking sites, these women are slowly beginning to reshape public discourse

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211 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven F. Rendall, Reprint edition (University of California Press, 2011).
212 Holly Kruse, "Fandom, Technology, and Practice," in Cyberfeminism 2.0, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, First printing edition (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012), 111.

and provoke people to open up and talk about issues of gender, sexuality, identity, and their own special brand of pop feminism.

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