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Using Female Empowerment as a Cover Story for Whiteness and Racial Hierarchy in Pop Culture: Interrogating the Intersections of Racial Appropriation and Feminist Discourse in the Performances of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga

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A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
University of Washington
2012

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
Department of Communication

University of Washington

ABSTRACT

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This project contends that the pop cultural production of the subject of third wave feminism — an empowered sexy yet tough, glamorous yet powerful woman — is deeply entangled in racial symbolisms that ultimately re-assert whiteness and maintain racial inequity. Investigating the songs, videos, and public performances of three contemporary white female pop stars — Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga — This analysis unpack the ways that racial symbolisms, sublimated cultural memories, and repudiated racial narratives circulate in these stars' music, lyrics, and video narratives as well as visual indicators such as fashion, hair, make-up, and posture. Because these performances represent and promote female empowerment in ways contested, yet consistent, with third wave rhetoric, some feminist critics tend to dismiss the racial dynamics as incidental or include them only in apologetic footnotes. This project not only re-centers race as a primary investigative lens, but examines how many of the discourses of female empowerment circulating in these pop performances are dependent on racial hierarchy for their efficacy. Using a critical semiotics approach, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the bigger project of decolonial feminism by cutting through the feminist alibi that allows feminism to serve as a cover story for the cultural reproduction of whiteness and racial hierarchy.

Keywords: Third Wave Feminism, Women of Color Feminism, Popular Culture, Whiteness, Intersectionality, Lady Gaga, Alibi.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As much as completing a dissertation marks the start of a career for many, it also marks the culmination of many years of study and challenges. For some of us, these challenges have been great, and the outcome of a completed dissertation and the degree of Ph.d, absurdly unlikely. When I dropped out of high school at 14 because I was pregnant, my pathway to a doctorate was none too clear. The subsequent years of my young life were too often marked by loss, addiction, trauma, poverty, and violence. But in my fight for survival, I found community with other fighters full of drive, artistic genius, stubborn persistence, compassion and generosity, who picked me up and pushed me onwards to discover and develop my particular contribution to the world. And it was the brave professors, colleagues, and authors in academia who provided me with the critical vocabularies, theories, and methodologies to begin to communicate and make sense of the illegitimated knowledges and standpoints I gained from the marginal, sometimes criminal, (and certainly unspeakable in polite conversation) world of artists, queers, and alcoholics that makes up a large part of who I am today. As such, higher education has always been more to me than a pathway to upward mobility, though it certainly has dramatically transformed my access to economic, social, and intellectual resources. Rather, or additionally, academia has given me access to language, conceptions, and tools to potentially intercede in the official record and declare - yes, I am... *we are*... here too, and it matters.

I preface my acknowledgements with these remarks to underscore the profundity of this accomplishment in my life, and thus the depth of my gratitude for those who have helped me achieve not only the degree, but also the critical consciousness that continues to shape my intellectual path. No mere words of thank you can compensate for the impact these people have had on my life.

First and foremost, I want to thank my adviser, Christine Harold. With great generosity, she took both me and my project on, and has been everything a doctoral advisee could hope for in a chair -- a smart and accomplished scholar who is equally fluent discussing the high theory of Zizek as she is dissecting Lady Gaga's latest tweet, and who in this process has always been encouraging, engaged, rigorous, thorough, and kind. I simply would not have completed this degree or dissertation without her mentorship.

Further, I am indebted to my committee for not only their thoughtful and important contributions to my project at various stages, but also for their influence and inspiration to me as scholars and teachers. Lisa Coutu has had more impact on my personal and professional development in graduate school than I can convey. She has modeled for me excellence in teaching, commitment to student learning, integrity and rigor in her research and her professional duties, and collegiality. But perhaps most important of all, she has intervened more than once at pivotal crossroads when all seemed lost, with the invaluable words: "Come in, shut the door, I'll put on tea." I am so lucky that LeiLani Nishime joined our department in time for me to work with her. She inspires me with her impeccable scholarship, and my project has benefitted tremendously from her careful readings that have resulted in accurate and helpful critique, while her comments of praise and encouragement have come just when I needed them most. Her adept skill of providing feedback with fairness and honesty is able to circumvent my grad student insecurities and enable me to receive and hear both, and as a result, become a better scholar. Ralina Joseph has been pivotal in creating and defending the intellectual spaces for critical scholarship to

flourish in both the department and university community as a whole. So many of my key research projects, including this one, have been conceived and developed in her seminars, under her tutelage, and/or in concert with a community of critical scholars and colleagues she has helped to nurture. This project and my overall research trajectory are unimaginable without her influence. Michelle Habell Pallán has also had a huge impact on my academic training and intellectual development. Her graduate seminars on *Feminist Public Scholarship*, *Chicana Feminism*, and *Women, Music, and Nation* have provided some of the most exciting and fertile grounds for learning that I have encountered. These were the courses that reflected everything I imagined grad school should be: a group of amazing and talented peers from a wide range of disciplines, discussing powerful and difficult texts, and producing interesting and memorable projects. I am proud to have been part of those learning communities and am forever grateful to Dr. Habell Pallán for her emotional, intellectual, and pedagogical labor in producing them. I am still humbled and elated that one of the most brilliant and important minds in contemporary scholarship, Chandan Reddy, agreed to serve as my GSR and read my work. Like the best philosophers, he condenses into succinct yet richly layered comments, ideas that might otherwise take me years of thinking to reach, if ever. I can only describe engaging with his feedback as a kind of intellectual *quickenning*, the effects of which are both alchemically transformational, and likely to reverberate throughout my future work in untellable yet exciting ways. I thank him for that, and so much more.

I am deeply grateful to the department of communication for generously providing me years of funding, as well as for offering opportunities for career development such as the graduate level pedagogy training, and the series of professional development seminars. I am also grateful for the support and courses offered by the faculty in the Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies Department, particularly David G. Allen, Shirley Yee, Sasha Welland, and Tani Barlow. Other scholars across campus that have influenced my thinking through courses, conferences and/or feedback on my work include Nancy Hartsock in Political Science, Habiba Ibrahim in English, and Alison Wylie in Philosophy. And I am further grateful to Miriam Bartha from the Simpson Center for her gracious willingness to demystify and teach organizational competence in the academic setting.

I have been uncommonly fortunate in having the support, friendship, and camaraderie of my fellow graduate colleagues, both in and out of the department. Particularly, I could not have finished this degree without the companionship of Vanessa Au and Katherine Bell. Vanessa has been an incredibly generous friend and ally, logging countless hours with me in and out of coffee shops, studying for comps, writing proposals, and dissertating, helping me navigate the politics, personalities, and bureaucracies of academia, especially as a critical scholar. She also makes sure I take time to try new restaurants, exercise, travel, and see a film or play now and then. What I should thank Kate for are the hours she has spent helping me talk through my project and ideas, helping me untangle the stuck parts, actually reading some of my drafts and proposals, as well as sharing her ideas, process, and writing in true academic exchange. But what I appreciate most about Kate is her almost imperceptible wry smile that got me through more than one awkward (and often inappropriately laughable) academic scenario. Kate has such acute insight and perceptions, I always know she gets it, but at the same time exudes a nonjudgmental quality that assures me that she both understands where I am coming from, and accepts me all the same. In addition to these kick-ass women, I am thankful for my connection to these other important allies, co-authors, conference-mates, roommates, commiserates, and intellectual and emotional sounding boards from UW including Laura Busch, Kris Mroczek, Sara Diaz, Martha Gonzalez,

Fahed Al-Sumait, Penny Sheets, Jamie Moshin, Louisa Edgerly, Nancy Van Leuven, Peg Achterman, Kristin Gustafson, Michele Poff, and Monique Lacoste. I am also thankful to my friends Sue Murray who in the midst of the dissertation "grey period," reminded me of the importance of art, colorful gardens, and soaking in hot water, and Bethany Black for introducing me to my furry dissertation-writing companions, Frida and Goonda -- who kept my heart intact, and my laugh muscles from atrophying through all the hours of research and writing.

I entered the Doctoral program with a sense of wanting to contribute to a broader project of social justice, healing, and teaching. At times the pressure of graduate school collapsed my vision into a narrow tunnel of fearful self-preservation. It was the wise mentorship and deep friendship of Aimee Carrillo Rowe that time and again reminded me of the glorious transformative possibilities of decolonial work both in and out of the academy. More than just my mentor, my connection to Aimee has been one of the most profound relationships of my life. She is my friend, my partner in crime and adventure from way back in the day, my cross-country driving companion, my hot-spring-in-the-woods mate, a powerful spirit woman, the mother of my beloved godchild, the most luminous Roque Luna, human to some of my favorite four-leggeds, Reggie, Aisha, and Gloria, and a brilliant theorist, writer, teacher, and scholar.

Through Aimee I have been introduced to a glorious community of feminists, performers, activists, scholars, and teachers who feed my imagination, provide me motivation, and link this challenging process to something bigger to myself. I am thankful to beautiful and fierce women who I have admired and who in turn have validated and encouraged me to walk amongst them: Becky Thompson, Sheena Malhotra, Ann Russo, Francesa Royster, Laila Farah, Naomi Greyser, Kathryn Sorrells. Along similar lines, I give thanks to Chela Sandoval who came to UW as a visiting speaker and provided both words of encouragement as well as a model of spiritual presence and self-actualization. I have read and re-read her inspirational inscription in my ragged, dog-eared, scribbled, and highlighted copy of *Methodology of the Oppressed* in times of need.

I continue to be grateful to the professors and scholars from my BA and MA programs that have forever made their mark on the scholar I am still becoming. In my MA program, my advisor Raka Shome was the first teacher to ground the amorphous "postmodern theory" into radical postcolonial feminist theory. She introduced me to whiteness studies, Gayatri Spivak, and Stuart Hall – a heady and exciting intervention into the life of a raw 21 year old. Anthropologist Koushik Ghosh, and Critical Pedagogy scholar Peter McLaren introduced me to some of the most important ideas in my intellectual arsenal, through the books and articles they have written and assigned, and through the conversations over community drinks or an outdoor barbecue. I continue to be grateful for the exciting intellectual atmosphere in the late 90s created through them with fellow grad students across disciplines, particularly Philip Craft, Melinda Pilling, and Cricket Keating (and Aimee Carrillo Rowe). And I never would have made it to graduate school at all were it not for the interest, personal attention, and encouragement of two key professors at UC Davis: Carole Blair who asked me innocently, after she honored me by choosing me as her undergraduate TA, which grad schools I was applying to, and Karen Williams, a UW alum who introduced me to communication theory generally and Prof. Gerry Philipsen's life-changing book *Speaking Culturally*, that made me think that graduate school had something to offer me, and that perhaps, I had something to offer back.

My initiation into critical consciousness around race, class, privilege, and struggle occurred before and outside of academia, primarily, through my life-changing association during my adolescence with a mixed-race group of survivors, scrapers, misfits and outsiders. The group included the openly gay and the closeted, juxtaposed with the hypermasculine personas of heavy metal subculture and ghetto life. Some of us were Chicano, some mixed race, some white trash, some seemingly middle class yet haunted, and some thought they were Mexican until a different paternity revealed during their teen years suddenly catapulting them from *vato* to biker. Terms like “working class” cannot capture the razor-edge line of survival that many of us faced. The blue collar mechanic amongst us who was able to hold down a job was considered rich, yet his paycheck often had to support a vast informal economy of underemployed and unemployable friends and *compadres*. We saw ourselves as a loyal clan of heavy metal aficionados who liked to party, but each of our lives and families were marked by trauma, leaving some of us homeless, some who spent their lives in foster care or the juvenile justice system because their parents were in prison or were addicts. Brothers, mothers, aunts, cousins, and neighbors were drug-dealers, gang-bangers, prostitutes, victims of overdose, and killers. Life was precarious so we partied hard and loved (and sometimes hated) each other fiercely. It was with them that I learned the key to belonging was to enter the stories they told, and was fortunate, and sometimes unfortunate, that I participated in many events that were transformed into legend. Though I would not choose to re-live some of it, the sense of belonging I felt intervened in a precarious adolescence. The names of my friends are tattooed on my heart, and I am forever connected to Eddie Flores, Richard Vargas, Marcus Black, Warren Jaros, Tracy Deal, Mike Rubio, and Leo Horta. Further, I am still marked by the love and friendship I feel for Abey Horta, who dares to sparkle against all odds, Julie Johnson, the most genuine and loyal friend a person could know, Serena Vidales Manwaring who not only served the most important role of first, second, and third best friend in junior high, but whose family took me in, supervised, and fed me when my own homelife was uncertain, and Genelle Jones, who broke through my tough rocker exterior to foster an appreciation for musical theater, new age spirituality, Tears for Fears, and *Harold and Maude*.

Moving from small-town Salinas to what I considered the big city of Sacramento for college, I found myself needing to find a new community of belonging. I happened upon a group of the most extraordinary musicians and artists who cared for me, raised my aspirations, and kicked my ass when needed. I have never met a group of more talented individuals than I found in and around the irreplaceable funk-grind band Phibes Infernal Machine. I will never be the same for having known the beautiful and talented Scott Clayton and Leenda Muñoz. I will always appreciate the friendship and laughter of Kelly Johnson Overfield, who took unconditional acceptance to an extraordinary level. I can still picture her response to any shameful or heinous confession, as she would say with a sparkle in the eye and a shrug, “Well, so you did that, need a beer?” I will always mourn the loss of Ken Mackrel, who had the magical ability to appear just when I really needed someone. He has fed me soup and put me to bed when I was sick, talked me through times of crisis, and has shared many an adventure. But even more, I am devastated by the loss of his talent to the world – songwriter and singer, as well as one of those genius musicians who could play every instrument guitar, drums and bass extraordinarily well, and none to his impossible standards. The two people to whom I owe the most, who have truly altered the course of my life for the better, are John “Cack” Quesada and Dominic Garcia. At a time when I was seeking to escape domestic violence, Cack literally saved my life by giving me shelter and lending me strength until I could stand on my own again. But, I am most indebted to Cack’s tough love, when I was failing as a student and at risk for dropping out of college. He

basically shook me awake, looked me in the eye and sternly insisted “You have a gift. Don’t be an asshole and waste it.” When someone with the extraordinary talent and legendary presence as John Quesada tells you that, it stirs a piece of your soul. My friendship with Dominic Garcia provided the ground under my previously flailing feet. Both Dominic and the entire Garcia *familia* fed and sheltered me, encouraged my studies, and inspired excellence. Dominic introduced me to the power of identity, pride, and community of the *Latinidad*. As my roommate, his always active congas and timbales pounded Afro-Cuban rhythms into my DNA and he showed me that music contains more than sound, but sacred rhythms of prayer, entire histories of peoples, stories of cross-cultural interactions, and the healing promise of the future.

Many of these friends continue to bless my life today. Some of us have found each other again when changes in life have re-united us. I am so grateful to the folks of “Bitchin’ Camaro” who have shared their grief, heart, and compassion as we come to terms with the untimely loss of Marcus Black. That so many people with ragged pasts and distant presents could come together in love around this beautiful man gives me great hope that I truly am part of something bigger. This group has deepened old friendships, such as with my long-lost friend Nikky Van Bruggen, re-connected across the Pacific Ocean after 20 years, and fostered new ones such as Helena Longton, whose loving nature and shining spirit draws people together. Also, I am honored to know and love the Black family: Marcus’s mother Anne Bisch displays so much purity of heart and courage of speech, it is easy to see from where her talented and gorgeous sons emerge; Todd Black, who after knowing for a few minutes, you are sure you have been friends for years and will remain so forever; and Dustin Lance Black, who I love as Marcus’ brother, as a fellow thespian from summer theater, and a fellow survivor of the intensity of Salinas in the 80s and 90s. . But also, as a filmmaker and activist, I am repeatedly awed and inspired by Lance’s honesty, his grace, and his willingness to make himself vulnerable by sharing his truth, his heartaches, his quirkiness, his talent and his love in order to change the world. If I can bring even a fraction of that integrity into my own writing and teaching, it will be due, in part, to the inspiration I draw from Lance’s amazing gift for healing through story-telling.

To state the obvious, I would not be here, literally, without my family of origin. But they have graced me with gifts far beyond the introduction of life. First of all, I am keenly grateful for the close friendship of my cousin Robin Clark, who shares the same sense of humor as me, and it turns out, very few others in the world. Our friendship has provided a much treasured outlet for the daily observations of humanity’s absurdity that 16 years of living in Seattle has trained to keep to myself. I relish our costume-themed family reunions every summer and being pirates, vampires, and I can’t wait to see what’s next. My older siblings, Andy Clark and Cynthea Clark were my earliest teachers, and while it turns out that not everything they taught me may have been true (thank god), they are deeply influential nonetheless. I am in awe of the people my siblings have become, both full of drive, self-determination, passion, insight and humor. I am constantly amazed by the way my sister Cindy energetically pursues her goals and *lives* life with both feet in. From biologist to race car driver, marketing expert to environmentalist, she is an indomitable force who lives continually demonstrates we can have it all. Hard-working and honest, my brother Andy’s life is the quintessential example of pulling oneself up by his bootstraps. From our earliest years, my brother taught himself how to take a pile of junk and transform it into a fort or a go-cart, and later in life, cars and houses. He is a good father, and a good friend. They both remind me that regardless of the hands we are dealt, we are a family of talents, will, and persistence.

My mom, Gail Clark, instilled in me from an early age that I could be anything I wanted in life, (though I'm sure she was disconcerted when my earliest career goal was to be a factory-worker -- inspired by that Marxist show *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* and all the other PBS programming I was exposed to as a child). As a seeker of truth and a student of life, my mom inspires me through her continuous working towards self-actualization. My Dad, Charles Clark, is keenly intelligent, a connoisseur of music, analytical, sharp, a traveler and adventurer and has a sometimes wickedly inappropriate sense of humor. Alas, we are nothing alike! But I appreciate him all the same. Both my parents have passed down, through their careers as teachers and as my parents, a passion for learning, teaching, and service, as well as spiritual and social aspirations that have helped me reach farther and achieve ever more. I am grateful too to my stepmother Thelma Fredricksen Clark, who has supported me, cheered me on, put up with my family, and sent me good fiction as an anecdote to academic overload. The Clark family is truly lucky to have her.

And finally, I must acknowledge, though words will never be enough, Rupesh Mane, my life partner, and best friend. Living with and loving Rupesh is the only thing in this life that has come easy to me. I am sure I have put him through serious trials during this process, but he is the most loyal, kind, patient, and endearing soul -- not to mention brilliant and accomplished in his own right. Despite cultural barriers and bleak astrological prognostications, I am amazed and delighted that after 10 years, our biggest arguments still revolve around the television remote. Thank you, Rupesh and thank you to the Mane family in Singapore and India who have supported me and my education.

DEDICATION

Kenneth Scott Mackrel (1971 – 2007)

&

Marcus Raul Black (1970 – 2012)

These two brothers of the soul remind me through their respective struggles and untimely deaths that the traumas of racism, homophobia, intolerance and poverty go beyond theory and text. Both have taught me the importance of passion, creativity, beauty, kindness, laughter and love. You will never be forgotten.

INTRODUCTION (CHAPTER 1): ALIBIS, RACE, AND THE PROBLEM WITH SINGLE-AXIS FEMINISM



Figure 1.1 Lady Gaga gets arrested in “Paparazzi” video for getting her murderous feminist revenge against her abusive boyfriend. Does she have an alibi?¹

[Feminist scholars need to interrogate] what contexts, under what kinds of race and class situations, gender is used as what sort of signifier to cover over what kinds of things.

—Gayatri Spivak²

“Alibi” is a term used both in the legal context, as well as in critical semiotics, to suggest a cover story to exculpate someone or something from guilt. Drawing from the Latin “being elsewhere,” an alibi suggests that the accused was somewhere else at the time the alleged offense was committed. Donna Haraway uses the term alibi synonymously with “defenses,” “excuses,” “substitutes,” and “dodges” when describing science’s exaggerated focus on objective entities such as DNA to avoid acknowledging the “material-semiotic articulations of biological reality.”³ Drawing from these notions, two interrelated meanings of the “concept-metaphor” *alibi* emerges in critical semiotics.⁴ First, an alibi refers to an excuse, an apology, a rationalization or justification for

something.⁵ And second, playing off the idea that alibi refers to being elsewhere, deconstructionists see alibi as an ideological deflection, deferral, displacement, “celebratory distraction or fetish,” camouflage, obfuscation, or as Chela Sandoval describes it, a “presence-absence” of ideological terms where the constructed nature and material histories of language and ideology are obscured as “always elsewhere” yet “also always present.”⁶ In critical cultural studies the term alibi is often used to describe ideological discourses where socially desirable discourses excuse or deflect from — provide an alibi for — exploitative conditions. For example, Roland Barthes describes how the spectacle of celebrity charity, specifically crystallized in the figure of a popular French Priest Abbé Pierre, becomes a distraction that allows the public to avoid addressing the structural conditions that create poverty. He argues that this popular figure becomes an “alibi...which a sizable part of the nation uses in order, once more, to substitute with impunity the signs of charity for the reality of justice”⁷ More recently Spivak critiques “the establishment of Western democracy as alibi and explanation for the development and preparation of the field of operation for industrial capitalism.”⁸ Spivak and other scholars such as Baudrillard argue that, in parallel to the historical discourses of “civilization” and “progress” serving as an alibi for colonialism, contemporary discourses of Human Rights and Democracy get used to obfuscate and rationalize the expansion of market capitalism. Thus, an alibi might be seen as a discursive move in which certain inequities, imperialisms, and exploitations are distracted from and deflected through the use of cover stories.

This dissertation is concerned about the use of certain discourses of feminism and female empowerment as an alibi – a deflection, justification, and cover story — for women’s participation in the continuing and ever-adaptive development and maintenance of empire and racial hierarchy in the contemporary North American context, specifically the discourses of third wave feminism in popular culture. This project contends that the pop cultural production of the subject of third wave feminism — an empowered sexy yet tough, glamorous yet powerful woman — is deeply entangled in racial symbolisms that ultimately re-assert whiteness and maintain racial inequity. Investigating

the songs, videos, and public performances of three contemporary white female pop stars — Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga — I unpack the ways that racial symbolisms, sublimated cultural memories, and repudiated racial narratives circulate in these stars' music, lyrics, and video narratives as well as visual indicators such as fashion, hair, make-up, and posture. Because these performances represent and promote female empowerment in ways contested, yet consistent, with third wave rhetoric, some feminist critics tend to dismiss the racial dynamics as incidental or include them only in apologetic footnotes. This project not only re-centers race as a primary investigative lens, but examines how many of the discourses of female empowerment circulating in these pop performances are dependent on racial hierarchy for their efficacy. Using a critical semiotics approach, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the bigger project of decolonial feminism by cutting through the feminist alibi that allows feminism to serve as a cover story for the cultural reproduction of whiteness and racial hierarchy.

Feminism –and/or discourses of female empowerment – has a long history of being used in concert with white racial and national caste interests. For instance, in first wave feminism, the white suffragettes in Britain used their potential ability to aid and assist the maintenance of the British Empire as a primary justification for their expanded public roles, such as voting.⁹ In the U.S., suffragettes as famous as Susan B. Anthony turned to explicitly white supremacist arguments to justify white women's suffrage out of resentment over black men's acquisition of the vote before white women.¹⁰ During the second wave, feminism and the theorizations based on a "universal woman" served as an alibi to cover racial disparities, masking the ways in which white women's ability to enter the workplace and escape the drudgeries of domesticity was enabled on the backs of women of color.¹¹ And in contemporary times, scholars have tracked the ways in which a kind of missionary feminism is being used as a justifying narrative for the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and the Afghanistan.¹² And finally, what I contend in this project, is that the premises of racial

hierarchy and whiteness are lurking in what some call third wave feminism, or contemporary popular feminism despite its pro-diversity or post-race orientation.

Although most feminist scholars are willing to concede that earlier waves of feminism are marked by less-than-progressive racial politics, third wave feminism tends to self-identify as integrative and diverse, "proceeding from ... critiques of the white women's movement that were initiated by women of color."¹³ Key volumes on third wave feminism suggest that the origins of contemporary feminism can be traced to the anti-racist interventions by women-of-color feminists such as Audre Lorde, who worked to expose and interrupt what they diagnosed as mainstream feminism's "refusal to recognize" the "very real differences between us of race, age, and sex," and the solipsistic agendas, experiences, and ideas of middle class white women which were masquerading as concerns of the "universal woman" in feminism.¹⁴ As a result, these third wave scholars argue that "the Third Wave was *born into* the diversity realized" by these earlier critiques by women of color and have been "shaped" from inception "by the racial and ethnicity diversity of post-boomer generations."¹⁵ However, it is precisely the tendency of these scholars to describe racial equity as an *achieved* aspect of contemporary feminism, rather than an on-going project, that makes the continual vigilance against racial alibis and the re-iterative structures of white privilege so important. As I have argued elsewhere, the framing of intersectionality and race-based critique as an origin story tends to parallel the post-race discourses circulating in the popular sphere which suggests that racial inequity is only a part of history and no longer structures contemporary life.¹⁶ The discourses of post-race, or in this case, the post women-of-color critique, combine with discourses of female empowerment to deflect awareness from the ways that contemporary feminism continues to be saturated with racial discourses which aid in the reproduction and securing of white privilege and racial inequity. I illustrate in this dissertation that the subject of third wave feminism — a figure of an empowered woman who embraces femininity while kicking ass, uses her sexuality to empower herself, and revels in being in charge — is inextricably marked

by racially specific histories of power, imperialism, and white privilege that shape the possibilities and limits of gender and sexuality.

The Contemporary Figure of the Empowered Woman

The primary site of interrogation in this dissertation is a figure representing contemporary female empowerment, extracted from third wave feminist theory and found in the musical performances of Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga. As noted above, this contested, yet ubiquitous feminist figure can be identified by several interconnected traits: a reclamation of girly-femininity juxtaposed with a tough or masculine side, an embrace of “to-be-looked-at-ness” and the display of female sexuality, and a strong women-in-charge-is-good sensibility. Tough yet sexy, glamorous yet ass-kicking, powerful yet feminine, this empowered female figure is featured in movies, television, politics, fashion, and music, as well as circulates in academic feminist theory and the popular feminist imagination.

Examples of this empowered figure abound. In the 2012 hit movie *The Hunger Games*, Jennifer Lawrence portrays Katniss Everdeen, a teenage girl who wields a bow and arrow in a violent fight to the death, but also looks stunningly pretty when her strategy to win requires wooing an audience of supporters and corporate sponsors. *Rolling Stone* magazine has labeled Lawrence “America’s Kick-Ass Sweetheart.”¹⁷

The character of Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* book and film series demonstrates a similar, though much more tame version, of the feminine yet tough persona. As one writer puts it, Hermione is “activist, powerful and full of agency, yet feminine, romantic and stylish – a new kind of feminism for a new kind of girl.”¹⁸ In the 2009 film, *The Blind Side*, Academy Award winner Sandra Bullock dons high heels and a pencil skirt to face down a tough drug dealer that threatens her son. With her blond hair in place, and her make-up impeccable, she growled in front of cheering audiences: “you threaten my son, you threaten me... If you so much as set foot downtown, you will be sorry. I’m in a prayer group with the D.A., I’m a member of the NRA and I’m always packing.”¹⁹

And In 2010, movie goers were introduced to “Hit Girl,” the hyper violent little girl in the film *Kick Ass* who drew lots of controversy because of the juxtaposition of her rampant killing, sword wielding, and swearing performed with innocent pig tails and a schoolgirl uniform. One film reviewer professes her “love for a girl who outperforms the boys. Even with all the blood and cussing” she writes, “Hit-Girl is a feminist character.”²⁰



Figure 1.2 Jennifer Lawrence, (left) star of *Hunger Games* and 12-year-old Chloe Moretz (right) as “Hit Girl in *Kick Ass*.”²¹

These characters join the ranks of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Courtney Love, *Lara Croft*, *Xena*, and Ripley in *Alien* who have been favorite subjects of earlier volumes on feminist pop culture studies.²² What these figures all have in common is the combination of tough — sometimes violent — agency coupled with feminine glamour, style, and/or girliness. While there has been much debate as to whether these particular icons, or particular characteristics, are truly feminist or not, this tough yet sexy, powerful yet feminine figure permeates the common sense of female empowerment.

My analysis focuses on three successful icons of female empowerment in popular music: Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. All three have demonstrated both cultural impact and

longevity in a particular medium – popular music.²³ All three are quintessential representations of this figure of the empowered woman in popular culture. All three are chart topping, award winning, and commercially successful female pop singers and performers who have demonstrated a continued relevance and staying power in popular music. And, as this analysis will show, all three traffic heavily in racial symbolisms in their music, styles, and visual narratives.

Notes about feminist terminology

Before describing in more detail the discourses of what I am calling contemporary, popular, and/or third wave feminism, it is important to note that all of the traits, as well as the labels “feminism,” “post-feminism,” and “third wave feminism” are highly contested terms. For example, what some authors claim as key symbols of the third wave of feminism, such as the celebration of public female sexual display, other authors, such as Susan Douglas and Ariel Levy, define as “enlightened sexism” or “female chauvinism.”²⁴ In other words, Douglas and Levy describe the very same phenomenon that demonstrates feminism to one set of theorists as signs of the cooptation and sabotage of feminism, or the opposite of feminism from their viewpoint. The difference between “third wave” feminism, other kinds of feminism or even repudiations of feminism is also not always clear. As mentioned earlier, third wave feminism locates its origin in anti-racist critique posed by women-of-color and anti-racist feminists in the 1980s and ‘90s. However, the term “third wave” has shifted since then to describe more of a generational shift. Now third wave feminism tends to describe a feminism primarily of young women, and one that focuses on representation and media more than political policy, that embraces contradiction, postmodernism, diversity, and that typically celebrates the four traits I detail here.²⁵ In those ways, “third wave feminism” is a useful encompassing term to describe the discourses of female empowerment that this dissertation intends to analyze. However, at the same time, many popular icons of women’s empowerment who may be claimed or celebrated by third wave feminism, such as the primary artists of this dissertation —Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga — have ambivalent relationships to the term

“feminism” in general. Fergie has even been labeled by some as an anti-feminist. One critic suggests her songs, such as “My Humps” “sets back feminism half a century.”²⁶ Gwen Stefani claims to support women’s power, equality, and choices, but is unsure she would claim the title “feminist” because she thinks the meaning of the term is culturally ambiguous.²⁷ And Lady Gaga has directly claimed: “I’m not a feminist. I hail men. I love men.”²⁸ Later she amended her position to say she is “a feminist who believes in the importance of femininity”²⁹ Typically, this ambivalence towards the term feminism is diagnosed as “postfeminism,” the perception that feminism has achieved the important goals, has been incorporated into the common sense of the public and thus is no longer needed as a social movement or identity label. Generally, postfeminism in this regard is seen by academic feminists as undercutting the goals of feminism. For instance one summarizes, there is a “critical perception of postfeminism as a depoliticized and anti-feminist backlash that acts as a ruse of patriarchy to spread false consciousness among women.”³⁰

To confuse matters even more, another set of ideas has converged under the rubric “postfeminism” in which the “post” refers not so much to a chronological sense of “after” feminism, but rather connects to feminism the ideas of postmodernism, post-structuralism and other post-identity stances. For instance, for Ann Brooks “postfeminism becomes a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting patterns of thought.”³¹ Taken this way, the postfeminist ideology deconstructs traditional binaries such as male/female in favor of multiplicity, polyvocality, and fragmented identities. Thus, postfeminism may be seen as one which “critically question[s] the notion of coherent identities and view[s] freedom as resistance to categorization or identity.”³² Under this definition of postfeminism, cultural critics Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong’o praise Lady Gaga’s ambivalence towards feminist labeling for its ability to “up-end ... identitarian models of subjectivity.”³³

What the confusion and contestation of terminologies means within my particular project is that I often claim as feminist what some reject as not feminist, or I collapse a broad range of

discourses around female empowerment, from popular to academic, under the banner of feminism. What matters for this project is that these discourses and traits – girly femininity juxtaposed with toughness and strength, women in charge, and public sexuality – all circulate under the *sign* of female empowerment and/or feminism even if they are not universally sanctioned as such by academic theorizing or popular opinion. What I am interested in more than diagnosing whether a particular act, idea, or performance is truly feminist or not, is examining how the sign of feminism functions as an alibi for re-producing and re-iterating white privilege and racial hierarchy. In fact, as I will discuss later on, sometimes the rejection of certain performances as feminist can itself become a kind of alibi to distance feminism from the racial underbelly which subtends many of these empowerment discourses, both controversial and mainstream.

Examining the four traits of the empowered woman

A first key discourse that circulates in contemporary feminism is a celebration or reclamation of overt femininity or what Baumgartner and Richards call “girly feminism,” which includes embracing “formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish and fun.”³⁴ The advocates of reclaiming aspects of stereotypical femininity, such as an interest in fashion and make-up, see it not as a regressive capitulation to restrictive gender norms, but as a reaction against the seeming rigidity of second wave positions. For instance, some famous second wave scholars such as Mary Daly tended to reject femininity because of its association with subordination and weakness.³⁵ In contrast, third wave feminists suggest that pairing femininity with strength actually combats the misogynistic logic that devalues femininity in the first place. For instance, Baumgardner and Richards argue “you don’t have to make the feminine powerful by making it masculine,” and call instead for strong, feminine role models.³⁶

Further, many third wave or postmodern feminists see the strategic performance of femininity as a potential way to denaturalize gender. Rather than reinforce rigid gender roles, some of these authors suggest that strategic use of femininity can be used to destabilize gender when

performed ironically, in excess or through the juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity. For instance, Jeannine Delombard describes embracing femininity through “femmenism” as “the riptide that drags nature and nurture, essentialism and constructivism, and all other binary oppositions out to sea.”³⁷ Melissa Klein praises the aesthetic pairings by Riot Grrls — “1950s dresses with combat boots, shaved hair with lipstick, studded belts with platform shoes” — as creating “not models of androgyny so much as models of contradiction.”³⁸ And Shugart and Waggoner praise both “hyperfemininity” which they describe as over-the-top or super-saturated use of feminine visual symbols such as girly hair, make-up, clothing, glamour, as well as the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine traits because the “theatricality” of it “ensures an apprehension of that persona precisely as performed or constructed.”³⁹ For the majority in this camp, contradiction and exposure of the performative nature of gender ultimately deconstructs gender binaries. Thus, femininity is reclaimed as both resistive and playful components of a new feminism.

All three of the women I analyze — Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga — display multiple signs of femininity through hair-styles, clothing, make-up, posture, voice, and so on. And, each has also been celebrated in either the academic or the popular literature as being ironically hyperfeminine or for the concurrent and often contradictory uses of both femininity and masculinity. Gwen Stefani and Fergie’s juxtapositions of femininity and glamour with toughness and athleticism are frequently described in popular media. A *Rolling Stone* article profiles Fergie’s “natural uncategorizability” to explain “why one moment she’s tomboyish in a sporty tank... dancing like one of the boys, and then a lady in heels, a Betty Boop-ish flirt who winks seductively.”⁴⁰ An *Elle* magazine cover story says similar things of Gwen Stefani: “Something about Gwen Stefani seems to reconcile opposites—humble celebrity, femme jock, surrealist material girl—and has ever since the early No Doubt days when she was the girl in the guys’ band touring the rock dives of America in a van. “I would ‘go off’ in the mosh pit,” she says, “but I was always very

glamorous before I dove in.”⁴¹ Another article defines both Gwen and Fergie as “the next stage of girl power: a weird mix of tomboyish athleticism and coquettish seduction.”⁴²

Lady Gaga, in turn, has been credited with taking the “performative” nature of gender to a whole new level.⁴³ While some worry that Lady Gaga is merely reproducing the standards of female beauty, others suggest that Lady Gaga is performing “a kind of hyperfeminine drag ... which unsettles what we think of as being conventionally beautiful.”⁴⁴ For instance, one critic argues, “her make-up, outfits, hair are all monstrous deformations, for the most part, of the normative idea(l)s of female beauty.”⁴⁵ Much in the same way that Shugart and Waggoner praise Gwen Stefani’s theatricality, many see the femininity of Lady Gaga as subversive in its performativity. Thus, all three performers are not only feminine, but they often present femininity ironically or excessively, in line with the third wave sensibility.

A key corollary to glamorous femininity is the second trait — a requisite toughness that is often portrayed as “kicking ass” in popular representation.⁴⁶ A spate of books such as *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* and *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* have been published which examine and celebrate the role of tough women in film and television.⁴⁷ Toughness, these authors suggest, can be identified in terms of body, style, attitude, and action. For instance, Sherri Inness suggests women’s bodies can be “made to appear tough through style” because although toughness is not clearly definable as equivalent to masculine, she argues, khakis do seem tougher than a pink tutu and a black biker jacket is tougher than a white leather jacket with fringe.⁴⁸ In addition to physical appearance, Inness describes a certain attitude of toughness, such as the ability to overcome hardship, to fight, lead, and take action when necessary.

Other scholars focus on the allure of the violent female avenger to the feminist imaginary. For instance, McCaughey and King claim “most feminists oppose violence... yet often enjoy scenes in which female characters define themselves, save the day, seek revenge, and get away with it in the

end.”⁴⁹ For example, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, the quintessential female action heroes such as Uma Thurman in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* and Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft, Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, and *Salt* are typically celebrated as feminist or at least empowering images for girls and women. These authors argue that the disruption of the myth of the passive woman provides women with a powerful counternarrative to the ever-present threat of violence against women. In a similar vein, film theorist Jacinda Read discusses the paradigmatic “rape revenge” narrative as feminist. In the prototypical revenge story, a feminine character is violated through rape, undergoes some kind of transformation as a result, and then seeks revenge. While early rape-revenge narratives in film tended to kill off or punish the avenging women, Read notes that more and more often in contemporary cinema, the women get away with it, making for a potentially powerful feminist fantasy. Because of the pervasive and paradigmatic nature of the rape revenge narrative, Read suggests, the original rape or domestic violence situation has become metaphoric for general patriarchal violence such that physical violation no longer needs to explicitly underwrite revenge against men in a feminist film narrative.⁵⁰ In other words, almost any film that shows women beating up and triumphing over men can be read, according to Read, through the rape revenge narrative.

In sum, toughness is a prevalent characteristic of the new feminist persona, and the use of tough girl images is quite prevalent in the performances of Fergie, Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga. Through stylistic devices such as “chola” fashion, rap, street style, and the willingness to use violence in videos such as Stefani’s “Hollaback Girl” and Fergie’s “London Bridge,” these performers produce an image of toughness as a vehicle for female empowerment.⁵¹ Lady Gaga has also taken up the images of toughness in the prison scenes of her video “Telephone,” through the gun-wielding militarized images in “Alejandro,” and in her biker-gang, chola-style Mary Magdalene character in “Judas.”⁵² More particularly, many of Lady Gaga’s videos follow the thread of the feminist revenge narrative. Lady Gaga routinely kills men out of revenge for various crimes, as seen in “Paparazzi”

and “Bad Romance,” and heavily cites Quentin Tarantino’s woman-gets-revenge film *Kill Bill* as well as the female buddy revenge film *Thelma and Louise* in her video “Telephone.”⁵³

A third, and as I have already suggested, highly contested characteristic circulating in contemporary female empowerment discourse is an embrace of women’s public sexuality and erotic agency in the representational sphere. The advocates of public sexual expression often pit their proclaimed liberality against a perceived prudishness, rigidity or anti-sex position of second wave feminism.⁵⁴ Much feminist work, particularly in the second wave, has focused on examining and exposing the sexual objectification of women in advertisement, film, and television. While third wave and other contemporary feminists see these analyses as useful, they reject what they see as paternalistic, censorial moves emerging as a result. For instance, third wave feminists tend to vehemently contest the anti-pornography dogmas of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon. Dworkin and Mackinnon posited that sex within heterosexual unions is the paradigmatic site of gender inequality and thus, is where male domination and female subordination is sutured. Dworkin and Mackinnon take a radical position that many depict as “anti-sex” when they argue that any participation by women in these processes — particularly pornography, but by implication, all hetero-sex — reflects a process which constrains free will, and thus no consent can truly be given.⁵⁵ In contrast, “pro-sex” feminists seek to celebrate the pleasures of not only sexual activity, but most contentiously sexual display, the use of sexual power, and an overt sexual subjectivity in the representational sphere. While not a homogenous position, there are a number of pro-sex trends that mark feminist popular culture: the recuperation of promiscuity and sexual performance, the rejection of paternalism, and the shift from sexual victimization to sexual agency predicated on the self-awareness of women in their sexual performance as well as the recognition that sexuality can be a site of *power* for women, especially in relation to men.

Because conservative sexual morality has tended to constrain women’s sexuality, some have come to view prolific sexual activity (i.e., the rejection of these constraints) as a feminist act in

itself. This rhetorical move is reflected in Naomi Wolf's book title *Promiscuities*, the Riot Grrls' reclamation of the labels "whore" and "slut," and the rise of SlutWalks through North America and beyond.⁵⁶ In addition to physical promiscuities, some postmodern feminists also call for promiscuity of representation. For instance, to counter the oppressive images of pornography and female victimization, Judith Butler calls for a proliferation of counter-sexual imagery rather than censorship. In Butler's logic, a range of sexual expression which expands what Melanie Waters calls the "pornographic imaginary" destabilizes "dominant modes of sexual representation" by revealing their constructed (and thus non-necessary) natures.⁵⁷

Coupled with the reclamation of promiscuity is an ardent rejection of paternalism. Whether or not sexual expression leads to liberation, what many third wave feminists specifically chafe against is what they consider to be paternalistic attempts to protect women from themselves. In *Manifesta*, Baumgardner and Richards reject the notion that all women are passive victims of sexual exploitation. Instead they insist "women can handle the tools of patriarchy and don't need to be shielded from them."⁵⁸ What women need from feminism, according to Baumgardner and Richards, is not protection "from men or porn" but rather to be given the "same protections men enjoy in the eyes of the law."⁵⁹ In a similar vein, a feminist blogger argues that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not a feminist television show because Buffy is too constrained in her sexuality. The blogger writes: "Buffy ... is kept almost virginal and is punished severely almost every time she has sex." Rather than what the blogger would like to see—an endorsement of female sexuality and pleasure—the blogger rejects what she sees instead as the show's imposition of "bullshit sexual morality on its audience."⁶⁰

Thus, the contemporary female icon is generally celebrated for an active engagement with sexual self-presentation. And, rejecting the notion of women as cultural dupes, these contemporary icons generally are recognized for their *knowingness* – an ironic, conscious and self-aware deployment of sexuality. That awareness allows for what Gills identifies as the move from sexual

object to sexual *subject*. She notes: “what is novel and striking about contemporary sexualised representations of women in popular culture is that they do not (as in the past) depict women as passive objects but as knowing, active, and desiring subjects.”⁶¹ In direct contrast to Dworkin and MacKinnon’s position of sex as structurally non-consensual, this perspective asserts and affirms women’s (sexual) agency through free choice and self-awareness.

Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga have all been recognized in popular or academic literature for “pro-sex” themes as central parts of their empowered personas. For instance, Shugart and Waggoner praise Gwen Stefani for an “articulation of a collective version of female sexuality that is... alternative and even resistive to convention.”⁶² Because Stefani’s sexuality is “infused with agency” and a self-conscious “ironic humor,” they suggest she resists “easy objectification.”⁶³ Thus, for Shugart and Waggoner, Gwen Stefani’s specific use of self-conscious and playful sexiness becomes one of the key sites of her feminist transgressiveness. Lady Gaga also centers sexuality in her videos and performances. Her admission of bi-sexuality, rumors of intersexuality, and erotic clothing, dance, and displays have been praised for challenging the status quo of sexual possibility. Following the Butlerian logic described above, Jack Halberstam is drawn to the way Gaga is “lesbian but not quite lesbian.”⁶⁴ Because Lady Gaga resists fully identifying with either heteronormative or homonormative sexualities, Halberstam suggests, she opens up a proliferation of new possibilities.

Fergie’s blatant use of traditional female sexual display, from stripping in “London Bridge” and jumping out of a cake in “Fergalicious” to using her body to attract male attention and gifts in “My Humps,” has attracted the most criticism. For instance, feminist music critic Ann Powers writes: “As humps-baring Fergie ... proves, women also seem more willing than ever to participate in their own objectification.”⁶⁵ However, fans have defended Fergie’s “look-at-me” sexuality as agentful and self-aware. One fan argues: “Fergie’s response seems more knowing and winking than that of someone in a position of weakness.”⁶⁶ Others have praised her for owning her sexuality, and using it as a tool of power rather than victimization.⁶⁷ Although perhaps the most contested trait of

contemporary feminist discourse, “look-at-me” sexuality is also one of the most pervasive traits of pop cultural icons, and has become an important site for negotiating claims of female empowerment in the cultural imagination.

Finally, every popular incarnation of feminism seems to include the promotion and recognition of women’s drive for power and success, women in roles of leadership, and women succeeding in male dominated fields. In fact, women’s equality in attaining positions of power dominates the popular common sense as the *raison d’etre* of feminism. Although the premises of contemporary neoliberal feminism – a celebratory stance towards an unrestrained will to power, female authority and economic success — are contentious subjects in academic feminism, they circulate heavily in both feminist pop culture and in pop cultural analysis.⁶⁸

Even with pervasive anxiety around what a woman’s will to power should look like, the figure of the empowered woman is undeniably one with ambition, authority, and the ability to lead. For instance, Sherrie Inness argues that the empowering aspects of toughness is precisely its connection to women’s ability to “project authority” and signifies “women’s desire for power, self-sufficiency and autonomy.”⁶⁹ She is particularly concerned with women competing for traditionally masculine leadership positions such as “football coach, CEO of a major corporation, and president of the United States.”⁷⁰ Controversial feminist commentator Naomi Wolf most vividly advocates a “power feminism” which she calls on to re-invigorate “a regal, robust, healthy self-regarding ‘will to power.’”⁷¹ Coupled with female ambition is the notion of economic power. In her taxonomy of feminism, Chris Beasley identifies this set of ideas as “liberal feminism” which advocates “meritocratic social hierarchy, personal responsibility, public success, and the individual.”⁷² From this perspective, the goal of feminism is to enable individual women to successfully compete in the current economic system and power structure, pave the way for women to occupy positions of power in business and in politics, and ensure they receive fair compensation in relation to male wages.

Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are generally noted for their extraordinary success as female artists in a male dominated music industry. In fact, many commentators have identified their empowering potential in their economic success and ability to hold their own amongst men. Fergie and Gwen Stefani both hold the distinction of being the only girl in an all-boy band, as well as having successful solo careers. For instance, television news anchor Katie Couric identifies Fergie's role as a "rock n roll gal in what might be perceived as an all-boys' club" as emblematic of "Girl Power."⁷³ In addition, others see feminist power in these performers' success in business. For instance, Gwen Stefani herself locates her potential feminist appeal in her successful leadership of her clothing brand: "Working with L.A.M.B. and all the people around me, I definitely have been able to see the power of my position."⁷⁴ And, regarding Lady Gaga, a feminist scholar writes: "Lady Gaga benefits from feminism, which has arguably opened doors for her to become a successful businesswoman."⁷⁵ In short, economic success, leadership, being competitive in men's arena, and self-aware, self-directed agency are common indicators of female empowerment in popular discourse. They repeatedly emerge as tropes of empowerment in popular culture and feminist pop culture studies.

Sexy and feminine, yet tough and powerful: these categories of the empowered female serve as the backbone of my overarching rhetorical argument. However, this dissertation examines the ways these tropes of female empowerment are not solely gendered narratives, to be debated as to whether or not they truly empower women. Instead, the analysis in this project reveals that many of these tropes are deeply interwoven with racially-saturated historical narratives, particularly those which maintain white supremacy and racial hierarchy. Instead of asking whether these tropes are empowering for women or not, this dissertation asks which women might be empowered by such tropes, and under what racial, economic, national, and sexual conditions? Although I particularly examine the discourses of three female pop-stars, an analysis of the ways in which Fergie, Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga mobilize these characteristics in racially saturated ways may

lead to questions about the discourses of feminist empowerment overall and provide a framework from which to interrogate some of what I argue are prevalent racial constructions of gender and feminism.

Race and alibi in Feminist Pop Cultural Analysis

In its simplest terms, the key intent of this dissertation is to examine the unacknowledged and often problematic role of race in popular feminist discourse, primarily within popular culture. More particularly, I examine the way historical discourses of racial inequity continue to circulate under the cover of feminism, and often become the very grounds or enabling vehicles for certain gendered empowerment to occur. When I say race, I do not mean only an identity category, demographic demarcation, or question of phenotype.⁷⁶ Instead, I examine race through the lens of what Stuart Hall calls the “floating signifier” which serves as a socially constructed and shifting repository for racial meanings, narratives, histories, material relations, and powerful inequalities.⁷⁷ In concert with a powerful tradition of intersectional, women-of-color and anti-racist feminism, this project seeks to contribute to investigation of the ways race is co-constitutive with gender, not only in the sense of simultaneous *oppressions* that mark women of color subjectivities, but also in the fraught and paradoxical constructions of white femininity (and by its extension, white feminism). In the field of media and pop cultural analysis, this project draws from and seeks to contribute to a body of anti-racist, intersectional works which examine the overlapping axes of race and gender in music, television, and film such as those by bell hooks, Daphne Brooks, Vanessa Au, and Michelle Habell-Pallán, works which examine the intertwining alibis of post-race and post-feminist discourses, such as those by Ralina Joseph, LeiLani Nishime, and Sarah Banet-Weiser, and works which interrogate white femininity, and the intersections of whiteness and feminism in popular culture, such as those by Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Katherine Bell and Raka Shome.⁷⁸

For my particular project, the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga provide rich opportunities to interrogate the interplay of gender and race. Visual displays of racially marked

bodies, appropriation of styles from communities of color, and icons of white femininity saturate these videos. All three of the performers stand out visually by way of racial contrast with their background dancers of color. All three of the performers at various occasions “become” the racial other by appropriating the hair, make-up, clothing, vocal or musical styles of Asian, Latino, and African American subcultures. And all three of the performers traffic in historically recognizable symbols of white femininity. The aim of this dissertation is to interrogate these interplays of race and gender in the videos to examine the relationship between gender empowerment and racial appropriation, subordination, and privilege.

Despite the growing body of intersectional, racially grounded pop cultural critique I mention above, discussions of race continue to flit nervously in and out of the majority of third wave or contemporary feminist discourse. Throughout the literature are repeated declarations that inclusion of racial difference and diversity is central to third wave feminism.⁷⁹ Despite the professed commitment to multiculturalism, these theorists also confess that when it comes to popular culture most feminist icons are overwhelmingly white, and that racial parity has not yet been fully achieved. Despite this, when an article is not specifically marked as having a racial focus, most of the articles found in academic journals such as *Feminist Media Studies* tend to suggest that race is ancillary or parenthetical to the central concern of gender, or fail to acknowledge the way race may be formative to gender itself. As Robyn Wiegman notes, despite the recognition of difference amongst women and the fragmentation of the universal subject “woman” in contemporary feminist theory, it still “discounts the way in which specific cultural determinants (such as race) may at times not only outweigh the significance of gender but thoroughly shift the very productive grounds on which gender constitutes itself.”⁸⁰

The “single-axis” approach to feminism – i.e., the notion that gender can be theorized as a primary and isolated axis of identity or oppression, separable from race, class, nationality, or sexuality — is one of the primary mechanisms through which feminism tends to operate as an alibi

for continuing racial inequality. Particularly, much feminist pop cultural analysis tends to acknowledge there is a racial flaw or problematic racial relationship present in a particular text, but still salvages the icon or text for feminism through bracketing or side-stepping the racial issue as incidental or an unfortunate holdover from a less progressive time. There are several ways this alibi manifests.

First is the claim that if a feminist icon is racially problematic, it is because of some lingering holdover from the past —from patriarchy, second wave feminism, or from the conventions of genre or popular culture — rather than a problem endemic to contemporary feminism itself. For instance, in her examination of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Irene Karras notes: “One aspect of second wave feminism that *Buffy does not necessarily update* to the satisfaction of the third wave is in the economic and race structures apparent – or not – in the show.”⁸¹ She then describes the overwhelming class privilege and lack of non-white characters on the show. Yet, Karras attributes the whiteness of *Buffy* to *second* wave feminism, one that is no longer in line with third wave values. Later in the piece, Karras comes up with an alternative attribution for *Buffy*’s whiteness: “the horror genre” where “female victims and heroines are predominantly white.”⁸² Thus, for Karras, even though whiteness is a pervasive quality of the show she celebrates as example of third wave ethos, she rejects that whiteness is really a part of third wave feminism. Instead, she frames it as a rather an unfortunate lingering tendency of the genre conventions of horror or second wave feminism.

Sherri Inness makes a similar deflection with regards to the TV show *Xena: the Warrior Princess*. Towards the end of her analysis, she makes the obligatory acknowledgement that race is problematic: “a heroic convention that the producers of *Xena* fail to destabilize is the notion that a hero should be white.”⁸³ Like Karras, however, she attributes whiteness as a lingering effect of the genre conventions of the past: “although the whiteness of the hero or superhero has become less of a necessity during the last few decades, the realm of the heroic is still largely lily white.”⁸⁴ Still,

despite the less-than-progressive racial politics of the show, Inness applauds the feminist nature of Xena: “Perhaps it is too much to expect one television program to revolutionize the entire action-adventure genre. Despite its shortcomings, Xena still shows a [female] hero.”⁸⁵ Thus, both authors reflect a tendency to displace race and racial problems as being outside of contemporary feminism. While the gendered heroics are generally feminist, the less than progressive racial parts represent something that is not really feminist (but are instead generic, residual, etc).

The latter move of Inness, in which she still claims Xena for feminism, is indicative of a second key claim which implies that even though the racial politics are bad, the gender politics are good, and that the good potentially can outweigh the bad. In this second strategy, race is acknowledged as a problem, but is deflected in the analysis by foregrounding the gendered promises of the text instead. One way this shows up is through the inclusion of racial critique in a text that is then left unresolved with no further remarks given. For instance, in *Feminist Hollywood*, Christina Lane briefly registers the problematic nature of a rape-revenge fantasy where the attacker is racially marked: “it is important to acknowledge [the attacker’s] problematic portrayal as ‘ethnic other.’”⁸⁶ However, she concludes that his othering “implies the necessity of throwing a male body into crisis in order to attempt to investigate ‘woman’ as body outlaw.”⁸⁷ Although she recognizes in this short passage that his racial otherness may have been essential as the grounds for the emergence of white female transgression, she quickly moves away from the topic and does not unpack the implications. Thus, from her overall diagnoses that the film she is discussing is feminist, we can conclude that for Lane, gender politics can be separated from, and ultimately trump, racial politics.

More defensively, McCaughey and King reject a race-based critique of Ellen Ripley in *Alien*. In an earlier work, anti-racist scholar Camille Griggers argues that although feminists may celebrate leadership roles for women, in *Alien* Ripley plays out “the narrative necessity for a white woman to establish military leadership over a group of angry, discontented underclass black men who are

conscripted as laboring bodies by state coercion” — a power dynamic between white women and men of color that Griggers says “bears an uncanny resemblance to actual demographic flows into post-world war II military corps.”⁸⁸ While McCaughney and King register Griggers’ racial critique in their anthology about violent women in film, they chafe under the implications. In a footnote, they claim her critique is based on a mistake, in that most of the men in the prison are white, not black.⁸⁹ Then, in the text they ask, if it were true that there is an old racial power dynamic being played out here whether that should that intervene in a feminist reading: “Does Ripley (however unwittingly) serve a military-industrial complex and if so, spoil our pleasure at watching her?” Next they dismiss the racial critique as “untested and untestable,” its validity based on knowing the intentions of the producers, motivations of the characters, and whether audiences saw it that way. And finally they decide that whatever “their place in dominant orders ... these images at least subvert the notion that women will suffer abuse patiently.”⁹⁰ All of these rhetorical maneuvers suggest that even if there are some racially problematic aspects of the characters or plots, the value of gendered empowerment outweighs the racial costs.

Finally, the most prolific strategy of deflecting racial critique that circulates in third wave texts is to suggest that the pervasive co-occurrence of progressive gender politics with regressive racial politics in pop culture merely demonstrates the irreducibly contradictory nature of contemporary feminism. In the postmodern world, many suggest, all feminist readings of popular culture must negotiate the presence of some progressive elements alongside less progressive ones. What I draw attention to here is that the language of contradiction is used specifically to bracket or dismiss concerns of *race* as just part of the contradiction of the contemporary moment .

For example, Patricia Pender grants a paragraph to racial representation in her reading of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She starts with the obligatory racial admission: “Buffy’s racial politics are inarguably more conservative than its gender or sexual politics.”⁹¹ She then details the way the show is racially exclusionary, but how some strides were made in the final season — though the

results, she admits are “equivocal.” But ultimately she argues that “a critical analysis of Buffy’s racial representations need not be considered a critique of the palpable pleasures provided by the show” or be read as a “straightforward sign of failure.” Rather, she argues, we should read the positive gender representations alongside the problematic racial representations as “a reflection of the redoubtable contradictions that characterize third wave feminism itself.”⁹²

Jacinda Read also uses the language of contradiction and multiplicity to address racial conflict in her reading of rape-revenge narratives in film. She wants to make a space in feminism to celebrate “erotic” and “feminine” women “while remaining alert to the fact that [these] identities are not available to all women.”⁹³ In recognition of the potential racial solipsism of this position, she includes bell hooks’ racial critique of Madonna’s sexual agency and the sexualized body as a site fraught with danger and violence for black women. However, Read’s response to hooks’ interjection of race into the space of sexual agency is to suggest that neither of “these interpretations is wrong” but rather represent multiple points of view, from differential racial positions. Multiplicity, she contends, allows for both white and black women to have competing interpretations without negating the other.⁹⁴

As with *Buffy* and *Xena* and the other feminist pop culture texts mentioned above, feminist scholars and popular critics have also noted controversies of race surrounding Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. For instance, Fergie has been criticized for being a white girl who sometimes raps in a hip hop band.⁹⁵ Gwen Stefani has been publicly critiqued by actress Margaret Cho for the “minstrel” like characteristics of her entourage of Harajuku Girls – four Japanese and Japanese-American women who perform on stage with her and appear regularly in her music videos as back up dancers.⁹⁶ Lady Gaga has faced criticism for her appropriation of the styles of Grace Jones and other performances of women of color as well as for her use of the terms “chola” and “orient-made” in her multicultural anthem “Born This Way.”⁹⁷ Yet, the primary feminist

responses to these critiques have generally been to acknowledge the troubling aspects of their racial representations, followed by some kind of reclamation of their other qualities for feminism.

A feminist blogger, s.e. smith, utilizes all three of the above mentioned strategies in her defense of Lady Gaga in *Bitch* magazine. First she acknowledges that Lady Gaga might have some racially problematic qualities in her performance: "It's been pointed out that she appropriates a lot of things from musical traditions created by people of colour and nonwhite people."⁹⁸ Using the first strategy I identified above, smith characterizes this racial appropriation as not feminist: "These are ... things that I don't think of as feminist acts."⁹⁹ Racial appropriation, according to smith, is not in alignment with feminism, but rather is more of a music industry requirement. Smith then defends Lady Gaga, using the second strategy of suggesting Lady Gaga's feminist "good" mitigates or at least balances her racial "bad:" "On the flip side, [Lady Gaga] embraces and supports her queer fans. She's outspoken on topics like safer sex. She challenges ideas about beauty ideals ... She's a woman who has really harnessed social networking to propel her career; she's made it in an industry that is hard on women."¹⁰⁰ And finally, smith uses the third strategy, emphasizing the idea that contradiction is a necessary condition of the present moment. She suggests that "the feminist aspects of her work are deeply tangled with the anti-feminist parts" and that "either she abandons the anti-feminist aspects of her work and falls into obscurity, or she tries to strike a balance when it comes to disseminating some feminist messages and staying popular." Although smith makes this last claim as a reason to bracket critique of the racial politics of Lady Gaga, she ends up making the very argument I wish to examine in this project. If Lady Gaga must keep her "anti-feminist aspects" (aka racial appropriation) in order to stay popular and thus have a feminist impact, smith is suggesting that Lady Gaga's feminism depends, in some part, on racial privilege for its success.

Shugart and Waggoner make a similar argument about Gwen Stefani's use of the Harajuku Girls. Shugart and Waggoner recognize that "the exoticization of the Harajuku Girls remains highly problematic on the basis of race" but argue that their subjugation allows for "the resistive potential

... as relevant to gender and sexuality” to be “drawn out and more sharply defined.”¹⁰¹ Shugart and Waggoner are attempting to claim that the racial inequities are problematic but are trumped by gender progressiveness. However, they also end up making the point that I claim as my central thesis: that this kind of gendered empowerment is constituted by – and possibly could not exist – without the subjugation of racial “others.” For instance, Shugart and Waggoner argue that the gendered and racially debased Harajuku Girls become “‘foils’ against which [Stefani’s resistance] literally emerges.”¹⁰² Further, they suggest “the Harajuku girls serve as benchmarks for Stefani’s agency.”¹⁰³ In fact, they are suggesting that the racially-othered women performing in subjugated relation to a white star enables Stefani a kind of symbolic agency and empowerment that is not otherwise available. However, because Shugart and Waggoner are only looking at the axis of gender empowerment, they ultimately suggest that Stefani’s ascendancy, though racially charged, is resistive and transgressive because it furthers gender and sexual freedom.

All these of these strategies – defining racial problematics as outside of feminism, suggesting regressive race politics are trumped by progressive gender politics, or shrugging racial inequities off as part of the unavoidable contradictions of contemporary feminism – serve as alibis which deflect attention away from race through discourses of gender empowerment. Each of these strategies fail to take into account the way race is formative of the gendered subject at its core and feminist discourses emerging from that subject. Only if race and gender are theorized as separate axes of identity does it make sense to value one (gender) as more important or more central than the other (race). However, viewed from an intersectional perspective which examines race and gender as co-constitutive, the use of racial privilege to empower white women at the expense of or through the labor and bodies of men and women of color is a problematic “feminist” tradition with a long history. Using these histories as a lens to read the racial dynamics of the Gwen Stefani, Lady Gaga, and Fergie is a key part of my method.

Instead of viewing feminist empowerment and oppression from a gender-only perspective, the method and theoretical basis of this dissertation is grounded in post-colonial, critical race and intersectional theorizations, which view race and gender as not only interlocking and overlapping, but co-constitutive. In other words, an intersectional approach recognizes and examines the ways that what is theorized as gender, sexual differentiation, and/or masculine and feminine have always been tied up in notions of culture, and have developed in the North American context through contrastive discourses of race, imperialism, and class. Who does and does not count as a woman, what does and does not count as feminine, and thus what does and does not get named as feminist has always relied on a deep history of racial inequality, both symbolically and through specific differential relations of labor and service.

Since at least the early 1800s, women of color have called for women's rights activists to recognize the intersections of race and gender, not only for women of color but white women as well. For instance, Sojourner Truth's famous speech and memoir, "Ain't I a Woman" asked white women to understand the totality of her experience as both raced and gendered. Legally sanctioned rape by her former slave owner, and the birth and loss of children within conditions of slavery demonstrate experiences that are both specific to women and deeply structured by her racial location.¹⁰⁴ From a different angle, Ida Wells Barnett called on white women's rights activists in the early 1900s to account for their social position as both gendered and raced by taking up the systematic lynching of black men as an issue of feminist justice. Wells Barnett asked white women to take responsibility for their silent complicity in use of "defense of white women" as the pretense of systemic racial lynching.¹⁰⁵

Over a hundred years later, the repeated calls at the end of the twentieth century by the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, bell hooks and many others for feminists to stop viewing race and gender as separable and rankable identities suggests these early interventions were only partially successful at best.¹⁰⁶ To counter the solipsistic tendencies of white feminism,

women of color such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn have called for the development of intersectional theory which recognizes the “the interlocking nature of oppressions” and which addresses the “complex interaction of race and gender oppression.”¹⁰⁷ Although contemporary women’s rights movements are sometimes quick to encourage inclusion and participation of women of color, they have been slow to incorporate the notion that race plays a central role in shaping the gender subjectivities of all women, including white women.¹⁰⁸ Chela Sandoval argues that intersectionality has been “misrecognized and underanalyzed” as a “demographic constituency only” – i.e., as a quality that applies only to women of color, or as a problem which can be resolved through absorbing more women of color into established feminist arenas.¹⁰⁹ Instead, Sandoval and others note that race and intersectionality need to be incorporated epistemically as a “theoretical or methodological approach in its own right.”¹¹⁰ For these scholars, recognizing and dismantling race-based exclusions within feminism means a transformation of the feminist subject that examines the specific and differentially-located way all gender is racialized within relations of power. Intersectionality as a theoretical approach calls for the interrogation of race and gender as historically specific, materially grounded dialectical relations of power between not only “men” and “women,” but also between white women and women of color, and all other combinations thereof.

Advocates of the third wave argue that they are already heavily influenced by intersectional theory. For instance Heywood and Drake write:

What third wave feminists seek and find in the writing of hooks, Hazel Carby, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ntozake Shange, Patricia Hill Collins, Bharati Mukherjee, Patricia Williams, Ana Castillo, Coco Fusco, Toni Morrison, and so many others, is languages and images that account for multiplicity and difference, that negotiate contradiction in affirmative ways, and that give voices to a politics of hybridity and coalition.¹¹¹

However, by turning to a language of postmodern “hybridity and multiplicity,” Heywood and Drake abstract the intersectional theorizations of women of color to a general theory of “difference” which allows for evasion of specific theorizations or accounts of race.¹¹² What each of these mentioned women-of-color theorists underscore in their own work is the importance of race as a historically

specific, structural, and relational category which shapes gender at its inception. This means moving from abstract notions of difference to a decolonial approach that grounds feminist inquiries in material, historical and relational analyses accounting for race, class, and inequities of privilege. This transformative approach stresses, according to Alexander and Mohanty, “power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics.”¹¹³

Historically specific intersectional analysis within feminism might ask how global divisions of labor tend to be both raced and gendered and create relations of power between white women and women of color.¹¹⁴ Or, this decolonial orientation might attune feminists to histories of colonialism and slavery, and how those histories have shaped both public and private social roles for women in racial terms, which in turn shaped women’s movements.¹¹⁵ Or the intersectional perspective might orient feminists to the ways discourses around immigration, reproduction, and national belonging have not only created stories about women’s subjectivity (for instance as “mother of the nation”), but have also been deeply racialized, such as in the contrast between white mothers of the nation and “illegal” brown mothers of “anchor babies.”¹¹⁶ Rather than merely a category of identity, race in this context also becomes a repository of memory for excavating historical relations of power.

In the context of this dissertation, a grounded intersectional approach specifically means interrogating how race and gender intersect to form the subjectivity of *white* womanhood. For a number of reasons — including the evasive tendency to deflect race and intersectional identity as only the domain of racially marked bodies — explicitly intersectional feminist genealogies of white women are not as prolific as scholarship specifically interrogating the intersections of race and gender in women of color. Ruth Frankenberg notes, “while feminist women of color have worked to specify their histories and the contemporary shape of their lives in gendered and racial terms, a corresponding particularism has been often been lacking on the part of white feminist women.”¹¹⁷

In response, this dissertation specifically examines the dynamics of the intersections of race and gender functioning in white feminist representations, unpacking how seemingly unmarked descriptors of gender such as femininity, sexuality, toughness and power, have racially saturated histories and meanings. Thus, if femininity, sexuality, and power are racialized constructions, then tropes of female *empowerment* based on these constructions must carry what Robert Young calls “semantic echoes” of their racial histories.¹¹⁸ What I interrogate in this dissertation then, are the echoes of racialized narratives and relations of power circulating in the music videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga.

Notes on Method and the Texts

The task of the semiotician, according to Barthes, is to penetrate the alibi and identify the signs.

—Jonathan Culler¹¹⁹

Intersectionality as method and epistemology is deeply committed to restoring historical and structural context to the analysis of contemporary culture, especially where it has been discursively foreclosed. This method has been explained most lucidly in Chela Sandoval’s re-working of the critical semiotics of Roland Barthes in service of the political and epistemological commitments of intersectional feminism. It is similarly elucidated through Stuart Hall’s re-reading of Gramsci and Marx in the service of critical cultural studies. Sandoval calls this Barthesian method “emancipatory deconstruction” or “radical semiology.”¹²⁰ In brief, there are five primary assumptions that characterize this method.

The first assumption is that ideology functions semiotically. In other words, the method is based on an assumption that social reality, particularly relations of power and inequality, injustice and oppression are conditions that are produced and maintained through language and communication. Stuart Hall defines ideology as “the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation.”¹²¹ Because these relations

of power are formed through language, culture and communication are the appropriate sites to interrogate ideology.

The second assumption is the crucial yet basic semiotic principle of Saussure that there is an arbitrary and non-necessary relationship between signifiers (words, images) and the signified (objects in the world). From a cultural studies perspective, this assumption highlights the social construction of reality and meaning, and insists that there is nothing “inevitable, necessary, or fixed forever” about “tendential historical relations” of meaning. Thus, by extension, there is nothing inevitable, necessary or fixed forever about social relationships such as unequal relations of domination and oppression, a premise that underwrites the aspirations of social justice of cultural studies.¹²²

The third important premise of the method is that ideology is achieved and secured through the cultural forgetting of this non-necessary historical construction of the social world. In other words, Sandoval, Barthes, Stuart Hall and others argue that ideology functions by making relations of inequity and power, as well as socially constructed facts such as gender and race, appear natural, permanent, and inevitable. Paraphrasing Barthes, Sandoval describes ideology as having “the appearance and feel of a ‘natural’ object, rather than of a historically produced and power-laden event.”¹²³ Barthes suggests that ideology works by emptying out a sign of its history — what he calls “robbery by colonization” — which leaves socially powerful images, ideas, and concepts “half-amputated, deprived of memory.”¹²⁴ Because cultural symbols such as race, gender, nation, and sexuality appear normal and inevitable, they become part of what Gramsci calls the “common sense,” inuring people to the unjust relations of power that tend to accompany these ideas.¹²⁵

The reading method itself is built around a fourth key premise: we can expose and deconstruct ideologies by doing critical genealogies — excavating historical contexts — of everyday representations and discourses. Sandoval calls for a reading practice of “systematic excavation that leads the consuming conscious away from a sense of meaning-as-nature, towards the connections

of meaning to history.”¹²⁶ Although Barthes argues that histories and contingencies have been “cannibalized” from cultural signs, he and Sandoval suggest the “the historical links are still there” in the form of a “present-absence.”¹²⁷ Gramsci describes these historical links as “traces” which he defines as the “stratified deposits in popular philosophy” whose inventories have been lost.¹²⁸ Post-colonial scholar Robert Young refers to this trace, or present-absence, as a “semantic echo,” wherein figures and terms carry past meanings forward as a kind of echo or haunting that can be excavated.¹²⁹ And sociologist Avery Gordon describes this textual quality as a *ghost*, which she describes as “haunting reminders of lingering trouble.”¹³⁰ She considers ghosts to be an aspect of language and “the experiential modality” in which “abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied.”¹³¹ The terms *present-absence*, *trace*, *echo* and *haunting* suggests that there is something uncanny, slippery, or hide-and-seek about this sign-reading exercise. Because the nature of ideology is to elude detection and instead appear natural, inevitable, and ahistorical, looking for indications that ideologies are at work can appear to be a less comprehensive or straight-forward process than other projects of interpretation. However, it can still be systematic. It is a motivated and focused critical reading process that looks for traces of buried histories and then re-contextualizes the discourse within those sublimated narrative ties. Specifically in this project, this method materializes as a close reading practice which identifies symbolic representations of race and gender and asks “where have we seen this before?” If there is an echo of historical racial and gendered narratives in contemporary popular images, this method leads the investigator to ask: how do those narratives circulate or function today, and whose interests they might be serving?

Finally, I include a fifth premise as a clarification in response to recent arguments that sign-excavation is an overly rational or cognitive method. For instance, feminist scholar Beth Goodney critiques Jack Halberstam for trying to interpret signs in Lady Gaga video “Telephone.” Instead of a

semiotic approach, Goodney argues, Lady Gaga should only be experienced as spectacle: “a work of art like ‘Telephone’ need not be analyzed for its significance; rather we should be seduced by it and proceed from there.”¹³² Goodney bases this understanding of “Telephone” as asignifying spectacle on Elizabeth Grosz’ argument that “art does not convey meaning through signs, but rather intensifies sensation.”¹³³ What is useful in Goodney’s approach is that she warns against reading art and popular music from a purely rational perspective or one that attempts to impose comprehensive meaning, intention, or teleology to fractured cultural texts. Instead, she argues, scholars should acknowledge the affect, pleasure, and corporeal nature of Lady Gaga’s music and performance. She further suggests that allowing ourselves to be seduced by Lady Gaga’s “excess, and excessive reactions” opens “the possibility for undermining, deforming, and transforming normative ways of being and relating.”¹³⁴

Sandoval and Barthes agree that popular culture and art function through affect, and that as part of a critical reading method, scholars should allow themselves to be seduced by their texts. For instance, Barthes explicitly argues that the deconstructionist should “permit perception to consume ideology innocently, in all the sensuous and deductive pleasure such consumption demands.”¹³⁵ However, they would not agree with Goodney’s construction of sensation and seduction as dichotomous with signification. By arguing that listeners should *feel* Lady Gaga rather than *interpret* Lady Gaga, Goodney suggests that art can *either* be spectacular and affect-based *or* have meaning. In contrast, Sandoval and Barthes argue that it is precisely ideology’s ability to unite “perception, bodily sensation, and intellectual comprehension” that makes it so compelling and insidious. Thus, the fifth premise of this method is located in Sandoval’s contention that meaning itself is “conjugal, erotic, and satisfyingly naturalized.”¹³⁶ By Sandoval and Barthes’ account, it is precisely that which masquerades as pure sensation which helps to suture ideological meanings. As I develop more in the following section, it is particularly the corporeal and pleasurable nature of

popular music that makes Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga such interesting and productive sites of analysis for questions of race and gender.

The majority of this dissertation excavates the specific historical genealogies of white femininity in order to unpack the racial discourses subtending the empowerment claims in the performances of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. In addition to the meta-discourses constructing their stardom, I specifically focus on a number of music videos by Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga released between 2005 and 2012. Although music video consumption seemed to be in decline at the millennial turn as music television stations such as MTV and VH1 moved more towards reality-based programming, the advent of YouTube.com and other social networking sites has led to a greater consumption and circulation of music videos than ever before.¹³⁷ Music videos are powerful sites for analysis not only because of their cultural impact, but also because of their unique form: music videos combine music, lyrics, and visual imagery into 4-8 minute formats. The sheer density of semiotics available in a single music video allows for deep textual reading of a short bounded text. Music videos also provide unique analytic possibilities because of what Andrew Goodwin, Will Straw and others have described – and sometimes problematize — as the postmodern format of music videos: fragmentary images, prolific intertextuality, pastiche, citation, and non-narrative non-realism, combined with the structural as well as the affective, kinetic pleasures of music.¹³⁸

Music scholars, from both the musicology side and the cultural studies side of the aisle, recognize music as an important site for examining social meaning and history. Musicologist Susan McClary recognizes that by studying the structures which organize music, scholars can excavate “the habits of cultural thought that guarantee the effectiveness of the music – that allow it to make sense.”¹³⁹ Thus, for this feminist musicologist, music can provide insight into social organization, including gendered relations. She finds music particularly important to examine within social theory because of its relationship to emotion, memory, desire, and bodies. George Lipsitz also

suggests that since musicians “mined the memories, experiences, and aspirations of their audiences to build engagement and investment in the music they made,” scholars can investigate their music as “a vitally important repository for collective memory.”¹⁴⁰

According to these theorists and others, the processes of encoding and (re)constituting social structures, relations, desires, and fears into music often “operate below the level of deliberate signification.”¹⁴¹ The “particular aspects of music video – volatility, fragmentation, playfulness, heterogeneity and density,” according to music video scholar Carol Vernallis, allow videos to operate “at a threshold below which a narrative commences.”¹⁴² This non-rational aspect of music videos is particularly useful to my project, as I intend to query publicly contentious questions of race and gender. In the colorblind discursive environment of the contemporary moment, overt discussion or invocation of race is often dramatically foreclosed by a pervasive insistence on the end of race, or at least racial signification.¹⁴³ As a result, many race scholars suggest that because of the repression of racial discussion, race tends instead to circulate prolifically in the subconscious of the U.S., often in racially “coded” ways.¹⁴⁴ From this idea, it is likely that the less guarded the discourse, the more predominant racial signification will be. I do not intend to suggest that music videos are more racialized than other forms of popular culture, only that their imageries tend to be less guarded. My intention is to analyze and categorize the tropes of racial signification where they are most apparent, with the belief that these insights might help examine areas of feminist discourse where race is more heavily coded or only syntactically inferred.

Chapter Preview

This dissertation gathers the overlapping, intertwined racial discourses prevalent in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga into four general themes. The first content chapter, which I label as chapter two, examines the prevalent phenomena of the figures of the “cholo” and “chola” — a particular Chicano subcultural urban identity — which has captured the imaginations of these white female pop artists. A white woman becoming the cholo represents both cross-racial

and cross-gender appropriation, and as such, this chapter examines the way female empowerment discourses of the tough girl juxtaposed with hyperfemininity is intertwined with specific racial and ethnic histories — histories that are lost in the stylistic abstractions by white performers. Repopulating the sublimated context of the cholo and chola, this chapter examines the racial dependencies of these particular discourses of female empowerment, particularly in the Gwen Stefani's "Hollaback Girl" and "Luxurious," Fergie's "London Bridge" and "Big Girls Don't Cry," and Lady Gaga's "Telephone" and "Born This Way."

Chapter three turns specifically to the contemporary feminist attempts to reverse Laura Mulvey's theorization about the oppressive effects of the male scopophilic gaze on women. Instead of Mulvey's approach, a new thread of feminist theorizing suggests that women can subversively use the sexual gaze to their own advantage and carve out spaces of female empowerment through the sexualized display of the body. However, as most of the "gaze empowerment" discourse only furtively acknowledges, the politics of visual desirability versus sexual availability and the cinematic economy of the gaze have long histories in racial hierarchy. Race has shaped whose female bodies are protected and sanctified, and whose female bodies have been subject to violent sexualized display, and access to and empowerment from sexual display is not a racially neutral proposition. Using the lyrics, video and public displays of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, this chapter examines the racialized context of "look-at-me" empowerment, particularly with regards to oft-cited history of the Hollywood blond bombshell and the denigration of women-of-color as temporary or background objects of desire.

Chapter four continues examining the racial politics of gaze empowerment and economies of desire in the music video, specifically looking at the historically charged trope of "black men desiring white women." In almost every video of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, men of color, and particularly black men, are framed as the desiring male subject and consumers of these women's erotic performance. Examining the history of miscegenation taboos, and white women's

power over black men in the context of lynching in the antebellum South, I theorize that black men provide the white performers with both a hypersexual titillation which confirms their desirability and the white female position at the pinnacle of desire. At the same time, the highly regulated, and often deadly policing of cross-racial black male desire also provides white women a kind of “contained danger” – a psychological protection and/or feminist power over these particular men. Close readings of the videos demonstrate that through a deeply racialized dialectic between desire, danger, and containment, white women enact feminist dramas around sexual allure and public safety enabled by historically enforced racial power dynamics.

Finally, in chapter five, I examine the discourses of empowerment directly related to women-in-charge. Using Naomi Wolf’s power feminism, I examine both how Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are considered successful leaders career-wise as well as the fantasies of power they portray in their videos. What emerges is a number of racialized fantasies about sovereignty, from plantation mistress to factory boss to discourses of the “mother-manager” and imperial missionary. This chapter ultimately concludes that the feminist brands of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are both literally and representationally dependent on the labor of men and women of color.

Taken together, the analyses of these videos reveal a powerful, constitutive relationship between white racial privilege and feminist empowerment that is continually reproduced in contemporary pop culture. In the conclusion, I address the questions: “If it is true that white racial privilege affords gender empowerment, isn’t it good that at least some women advance? Shouldn’t feminists use all the tools available, including race or class privilege, to combat and dismantle systems of patriarchy?” In response to these unfortunately very real questions, I trace a literature which frames an alternative viewpoint of whiteness which theorizes it not merely as a set of privileges, power and property, but as a pathological subjectivity built on sanctioned ignorance and spiritual degradation. For instance, Mab Segrest argues: “we need to balance calculations on the benefits of whiteness with calculations of pain and loss for all people in this culture: for example,

sixty million people suffering from alcoholism... stress that contributes to heart disease and cancer, 50 percent of the population with eating disorders; thirty-four million adult women sexually abused."¹⁴⁵ For Segrest, whiteness does not only afford material benefits, but also contributes to an overall traumatic culture where the costs to self and soul are much greater than the gain.

Yet, this project does not end on a cynical note. Instead, following Aimee Carrillo Rowe's theorization of relational subjectivity and belonging, I seek to further develop a vibrant coalitional feminist subjectivity that is defined and empowered through relationality, providing positive alternative feminisms, coalitional identities and modes of belonging which are ultimately optimistic about feminism, anti-racism, and social justice.¹⁴⁶

¹ Screenshot. "Lady Gaga Gets Arrested (Photo)." From *Paparazzi (Music Video)*. Directed by Jonas Åkerlund. Performed by Lady Gaga 2009. Accessed at YouTube/LadyGagaVEVO: http://youtu.be/d2smz_1L2_0. (2/24/2012).

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The post-colonial critic: interviews, strategies, dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 52.

³ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *ModestWitness@SecondMillennium.FemaleManMeetsOncoMouse : feminism and technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 146.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 524.

⁵ Laura Scott Holliday, "Kitchen Technologies: Promises and Alibis, 1944-1966," *Camera Obscura Camera Obscura* 47, no. 47 (2001); Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Without alibi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xxvi.

⁶ Holliday, "Kitchen Technologies: Promises and Alibis, 1944-1966," 83. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the oppressed*, Theory out of bounds, v. 18 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 95; Jean Baudrillard, *For a critique of the political economy of the sign* (St. Louis, MO.: Telos Press, 1981); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

⁷ ———, *Mythologies*: 49.

⁸ Phillip Sipiora and Janet Atwill, "Rhetoric and Cultural Explanation: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 10, no. 2 (1990); See also Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁹ Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of history : British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Louise Michele Newman, *White women's rights : the racial origins of feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ "That is to say," writes Sherene Razack, that "autonomous women derive their autonomy on the backs of other women, A mesh of material relations surrounds their capacity to be autonomous—other women who are our babysitters, domestic workers, secretaries." Sherene Razack, *Looking white people in the eye : gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 34; See also:

Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From servitude to service work: historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor," *Signs* 18(1992).

¹² A. Russo, "The Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid: The intersections of feminism and imperialism in the United States," *Peace Research Abstracts Journal* 44, no. 5 (2007); Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "challenging imperial feminism," *Feminist Review* 80, no. 1 (2005); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson, and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹³ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third wave agenda : being feminist, doing feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Sex and Class: Women Redefining Difference," in *Feminist theory : a reader*, ed. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2005), 339. For origin stories of Third Wave Feminism see: Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, *Third wave feminism : a critical exploration*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁵ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta : young women, feminism, and the future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 77, emphasis added ; 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 : a critical exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca. Munford (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: H Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 117.

¹⁶ Rebecca L. Clark Mane, "Transmuting Grammars of Whiteness in Third Wave Feminism: Interrogating Postmodern Abstraction, PostRace Histories and the Proliferation of 'difference' in Third Wave texts," *SIGNS* 37, no. 4 (2012); For a discussion on Post-race discourses see: Ralina L. Joseph, "Tyra Banks Is Fat: Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 3 (2009); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without racists : color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); C. A. Gallagher, "Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America," *RACE GENDER AND CLASS* 10(2003).

¹⁷ Josh Ellis, "America's Kick-Ass Sweetheart. (Cover story)," *Rolling Stone*, no. 1154 (2012).

¹⁸ Christopher E. Bell, ed. *Hermione Granger Saves the World* (McFarland & Company, Forthcoming).

¹⁹ John Lee Hancock, "The Blind Side," (USA 2009).

²⁰ Julia Rhodes. "Kick-Ass and the Hit-Girl debacle." *California Literary Review*, no. 2/18/2011 (2010).

²¹ "Chloe Moretz as Hit Girl Photograph," <http://calitreview.com/8541>. Theo Wenner, "Jennifer Lawrence Rolling Stone Cover (Photo)," *Rolling Stone*, no. 1154 (2012).

²² Patricia Pender, "'Kicking Ass is Comfort Food': Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon " in *Third wave feminism: a critical exploration.*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Martha McCaughey and Neal King, *Reel knockouts : violent women in the movies* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001); Heywood and Drake, *Third wave agenda : being feminist, doing feminism*.

²³ Fergie (Stacy Ferguson) is both a successful solo artist [*The Dutchess* (2006)] with five top five solo singles on the Billboard charts, as well as a member of the hip hop band Black Eyed Peas. *The Black Eyed Peas* are widely perceived to be one of the most popular (or at least omnipresent) and commercially successful pop/hip-hop bands in the world. Billboard ranks them as one of the top fifteen artists of the 2000-2010 decade. Gwen Stefani has released two successful solo albums (*L.A.M.B.* and *Sweet Escape*) in addition to five studio albums with the ska-pop band *No Doubt*. In addition, Gwen Stefani runs her own fashion line L.A.M.B, and was listed by Forbes as one of the top ten "world's best paid music stars" as well one of the "most powerful celebrities" of 2008. Lady Gaga (Stefani Germanotta), with seven chart topping singles, and highly discussed cultural appearances, has taken the pop world by storm. She was Billboard's artist of the year for 2010, and one of Barbara Walters 10 most fascinating people of 2009. Of the three, Lady Gaga has also most fascinated the academic world. Though she is new to the scene in academic publishing terms, there are already online academic forums, conference panels, and even an online Journal dedicated to Lady Gaga (entitled *Gaga Stigmata*). There is also a forthcoming book on Gaga Feminism by J.

Jack Halberstam, and a number of edited volumes forthcoming. In sum, these three female artists are pop celebrities, with far reaching fan bases.

²⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta : young women, feminism, and the future*; Susan J. Douglas, *The rise of enlightened sexism : how pop culture took us from girl power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011); Ariel Levy, *Female chauvinist pigs: women and the rise of raunch culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

²⁵ Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay."; Clark Mane, "Transmuting Grammars of Whiteness in Third Wave Feminism: Interrogating Postmodern Abstraction, PostRace Histories and the Proliferation of 'difference' in Third Wave texts."; Susan Archer Mann and Douglas J. Huffman, "The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave," in *Science & Society* (Guilford Publications Inc., 2005); Gillis, Howie, and Munford, *Third wave feminism : a critical exploration*.

²⁶ Raquel Hecker. "The lessons of "My Humps:" Fergie loves Alanis Morissette's spoof of the chart-topping grindathon. Maybe her next tune will be a little less ... lumpy." *Salon.com*, no. 2/18/2011 (2007), http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/2007/04/13/fergie_morissette/index.html.

²⁷ Taryn Hipp, "Gwen Stefani/Love Issue," *Bust Magazine*, February/March 2007.

²⁸ Jessalynn Keller. "'I'm not a feminist... I love men': Rethinking Lady Gaga's Postfeminist Rhetoric and its Potential for Social Change." *In media res: a media commons project*, no. 2/18/2011 (2010), <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/08/01/im-not-feminist-i-love-men-rethinking-lady-gaga-s-postfeminist-rhetoric-and-its-potential>.

²⁹ Louise Gannon, "'I'm no dumb blonde of pushover. My Career in my Vision:' The world according to Lady Gaga," *UK Daily Mail Online* (2010), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1290580/Lady-Gaga-Im-dumb-blonde-pushover-My-career-vision.html>.

³⁰ Stéphanie Genz, "Third Way/ve: the politics of postfeminism," *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 3 (2006): 336.

³¹ Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge critical dictionary of feminism and postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41; Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms : feminism, cultural theory, and cultural forms* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

³² Mann and Huffman, "The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave," 57.

³³ Tavia Nyong'o and Jack Halberstam. "Iphone, U-Phone...Or Is Gaga the new Dada?...Or Roll Over Andy Warhol..." *Bully Bloggers: The queer bully pulpit you never dreamed of...* (March 22, 2010), <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/03/22/iphone-u-phone%E2%80%A6or-is-gaga-the-new-dada%E2%80%A6or-roll-over-andy-warhol%E2%80%A6/>.

³⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta : young women, feminism, and the future*: 80.

³⁵ Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*; Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology : the metaethics of radical feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

³⁶ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta : young women, feminism, and the future*: 135.

³⁷ Jeannine DeLombard, "Femmenism " in *To be real : telling the truth and changing the face of feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 21.

³⁸ Melissa Klein, "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community," in *Third wave agenda: being feminist, doing feminism*, ed. L. and J. Drake Heywood (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 222.

³⁹ Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egly Waggoner, *Making camp : rhetorics of transgression in U.S. popular culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 123.

⁴⁰ Touré, "Fergie Dances with Herself," *Rolling Stone*, October 19 2006, 68.

⁴¹ Joseph Hooper, "L.A.M.B. Chops: Gwen Stefani on her hit additction and kicker her Madonna habit," *Elle*, January 16, 2007 2007.

⁴² Joy Press, "Notes on Girl Power: The Selling of Softcore Feminism," *the Village Voice*, Oct. 18 2005.

⁴³ For instance, see Alexander Cho, "Lady Gaga, Ball-Out: Recuperating Queer Performativity," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture* 10, no. 5 (2009).

⁴⁴ Keller, "'I'm not a feminist... I love men': Rethinking Lady Gaga's Postfeminist Rhetoric and its Potential for Social Change".

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Women "kicking ass" is so prevalent that it seems to have developed a particular connotation with regards to the new empowered woman. Not only is it prevalent in the popular sphere, more and more it is used

unequivocally in academic papers with a positive valence to describe women who get things done, succeed, and have a tough “can do” attitude, and sometime literally, who violently “kick ass,” as opposed to being victims of patriarchy. For instance, the feminist blog “Feministing.com” has as their description “Young Feminists Blogging, Organizing, Kicking Ass.” Academic pieces more and more use “kicking ass” as a verb or adjective without further elaboration.

⁴⁷ McCaughey and King, *Reel knockouts : violent women in the movies*; Jacinda Read, *The new avengers : feminism, femininity, and the rape-revenge cycle* (Manchester; New York; New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the U.S.A. by St. Martin's Press, 2000); Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*.

⁴⁸ ———, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*.

⁴⁹ McCaughey and King, *Reel knockouts : violent women in the movies: 2*.

⁵⁰ Read, *The new avengers : feminism, femininity, and the rape-revenge cycle*: 164.

⁵¹ Paul Hunter (Dir). *Hollaback Girl*. Performed by Gwen Stefani, 2006. Music Video; Marc Webb (Dir). *London Bridge*. Performed by Fergie, 2006. Music Video.

⁵² Jonas Akerlund (Dir). *Telephone*. Performed by Lady Gaga, 2010. Music Video; Haus-of-Gaga (Dir). *Judas*. Performed by Lady Gaga, 2011. Music Video.

⁵³ Jonas Akerlund (Dir). *Paparazzi*. Performed by Lady Gaga, 2009. Music Video; Francis Lawrence (Dir). *Bad Romance*. Performed by Lady Gaga, 2009. Music Video; Akerlund (Dir). *Telephone*.

⁵⁴ This is ultimately a false dichotomy in that there are many feminists who neither embrace the radical anti-sexual position of Dworkin or Mackinnon but also raise many concerns about the anything goes pro-sex positions of some of the third wave feminists. See Ariel Levy for such a critique.

⁵⁵ Melanie Waters, "Sexing it Up? Women, Pornography, and Third Wave Feminism," in *Third wave feminism : a critical exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 254-56.

⁵⁶ Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities : the secret struggle for womanhood* (New York: Random House, 1997); Klein, "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community."; Russell Contreras, "Cop's rape comment sparks wave of 'SlutWalks'," *msnbc.com*(2011), http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42927752/ns/us_news-life/t/cops-rape-comment-sparks-wave-slutwalks/#.T0fVIXmeqSY.

⁵⁷ Waters, "Sexing it Up? Women, Pornography, and Third Wave Feminism," 256.

⁵⁸ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta : young women, feminism, and the future*: 141.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁰ Feminist-At-Sea. "Why Buffy The Vampire Slayer is not a feminist show." *Feminist at Sea*, no. 2/18 (2009).

⁶¹ Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 103.

⁶² Shugart and Waggoner, *Making camp : rhetorics of transgression in U.S. popular culture*: 120.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 133 - 38.

⁶⁴ Jack Halberstam. "Justifiable Matricide: Backlashing Faludi " *Bully Bloggers: The Queer bully pulpit you never dreamed of...*no. 2/18/2011 (2010).

⁶⁵ Ann Powers, "A Spy in the House of Love," *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 12(2008): 43.

⁶⁶ See comments at the end of: Hecker, "The lessons of "My Humps:" Fergie loves Alanis Morissette's spoof of the chart-topping grindathon. Maybe her next tune will be a little less ... lumpy".

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ For critiques on the abuses of female power, such as Abu Ghraib, and the concerns around an economic neoliberal frame see: Tara McKelvey, *One of the guys : women as aggressors and torturers* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2007); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Robin L. Riley, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Feminism and war : confronting US imperialism* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2008); Coco Fusco, *A field guide for female interrogators* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008); Amos and Parmar, "challenging imperial feminism."; Russo, "The Feminist Majority Foundation s Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid: The intersections of feminism and imperialism in the United States." Carolyn Sorisio, "A tale of Two Feminisms: Power and victimization in Contemporary feminist Debate," in *Third wave agenda : being feminist, doing feminism*, ed. L. and J. Drake

- Heywood (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Mary Douglas Vavrus, "Putting Ally on trial: Contesting postfeminism in popular culture," *Women's Studies in Communication* 23, no. 3 (2000); Heywood and Drake, "It's All about the Benjamins': Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States.."
- ⁶⁹ Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*: 24-6.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 17.
- ⁷¹ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with fire : the new female power and how it will change the 21st century* (New York: Random House, 1993), xxviii.
- ⁷² Chris Beasley, *Gender & sexuality : critical theories, critical thinkers* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2005), 33.
- ⁷³ Katie Couric, "Fergie: the Superstar," *Glamour* 108, no. 12 (2010).
- ⁷⁴ Hipp, "Gwen Stefani/Love Issue."
- ⁷⁵ Keller, "'I'm not a feminist... I love men': Rethinking Lady Gaga's Postfeminist Rhetoric and its Potential for Social Change".
- ⁷⁶ Nor however do I intend to dismiss it as a historically significant identity, demographic and phenotype. See Clark Mane, "Transmuting Grammars of Whiteness in Third Wave Feminism: Interrogating Postmodern Abstraction, PostRace Histories and the Proliferation of 'difference' in Third Wave texts."; Sandoval, *Methodology of the oppressed*.
- ⁷⁷ Sut Jhally and Stuart Hall (Dir). *Race the floating signifier*. Performed by Media Education Foundation, 1996.
- ⁷⁸ bell hooks, *Black looks : race and representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992); Katherine M. Bell, "Raising Africa? Celebrity and the Rhetoric of the White Saviour," in *Celebrity Philanthropy*, ed. Paul Allatson and Elaine Jeffreys (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013); LeiLani Nishime, "Aliens: Narrating U.S. Global Identity Through Transnational Adoption and Interracial Marriage in Battlestar Galactica," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (2011); Vanessa Au, "My day of fame on Digg.com: Race, representation, and resistance in Web 2.0," in *Transgression 2.0 media, culture, and the politics of a digital age*, ed. Ted Gornelos and David J. Gunkel (New York, NY: Continuum, 2012); Raka Shome, "White Femininity and the Discourse of the Nation: Re/Membering Princess Diana," *Feminist Media Studies* 1, no. 3 (2001); Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Samantha Lindsey, "Reckoning Loyalties: White Femininity as 'Crisis'," *FeministMS Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in dissent : spectacular performances of race and freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Michelle Habel-Pallan, *Loca motion : the travels of Chicana and Latina popular culture* (New York: New York University, 2005); Ralina L. Joseph, "'Hope Is Finally Making a Comeback': First Lady Reframed," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4, no. 1 (2011); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids rule! : Nickelodeon and consumer citizenship*, Console-ing passions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
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- ⁸³ Inness, *Tough girls : women warriors and wonder women in popular culture*: 175.
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¹³⁷ According to various statistical aggregators, Youtube.com, the number one site for video consumption, streams about 5 billion videos every month, and 1 out of every 3 of videos on Youtube is a music video. In December 2010 alone, Lady Gaga videos were viewed over 45 million times on Vevo (a music video provider service) by an estimated 2 million unique visitors. Mathematically, the average Vevo user watches approximately 23 Lady Gaga videos per month. See Ryan Van Etten. "2010 Music Website Heat Map." *Virtual Music TV* (2011), <http://virtualmusic.tv/2011/02/2010-music-website-heat-map/>.

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CHAPTER 2: PUT ON THE SUIT AND PLAY THE MYTH: WHITE FEMINIST APPROPRIATION OF THE CHOLO/CHOLA IN POPULAR MUSIC



Figure 2.1 Pink as Rosie the Riveter¹



Figure 2.2 Pink as a cholo gangster²

In her 2010 rock anthem, “Raise your Glass,” pop artist Pink juxtaposes the feminist icon of Rosie the Riveter with images of herself as a cholo-styled gangster. For Pink, both of these figures serve as representations of “underdogs” who will “never be anything but loud.”³ This correlation between female strength and cholo masculinity (sometimes embodied through the hybridized *chola*) recurs throughout the visual repertoires of Fergie and Gwen Stefani, and makes several appearances in Lady Gaga’s work as well. Even though the subcultural stylings of the Chicano cholo and his female counterpart, the *chola*, have formed in response to specific conditions of racial, economic, and ethnic subordination, the larger than life ethos of being “gangster” has often been abstracted and appropriated by white youth as a symbol of freedom, rebellion, masculinity, and power.⁴ This chapter focuses particularly on the ways that white *female* performers have mobilized the stylizations of the cholo and *chola* as a kind of gendered empowerment. In other words, when Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga enact the new feminist tenets of toughness juxtaposed with femininity, and a spectacular look-at-me sexuality, one of the key vehicles they use to these ends is the figure of the cholo/a.

Focusing on the role of cholo/a cultural symbols in white female pop music, this chapter contributes to the overall argument that this new feminist persona (publicly sexy, feminine yet tough, and in charge) is heavily dependent on racialized images and narratives, both in its inclusions and exclusions. I build this argument through three key moves. First, because the cholo/a appears in popular culture and music videos as decontextualized fragments of visual styles, I start the chapter by fleshing out the figure of the cholo, his historical predecessor, the pachuco, and his centrally important female counterpart, the chola. This historical and contemporary context provides a key foundation for identifying what symbolic work is being done in the videos through deployment of these images, as well as what is lost through the abstraction and appropriation of these figures. The second part of the chapter focuses what the figures of the cholo/chola enable within the third wave, gender-empowerment perspective. Specifically, through close analysis of the videos, I examine how the key popular feminist ideals of espousing toughness, espousing the transgression of traditional gender boundaries of femininity and masculinity, and espousing of overt sexuality are specifically enabled by the cross-gender and cross-racial appropriation of the figure of the cholo. And finally, in the third part of the chapter, I interrogate the politics of whiteness that simultaneously enable white female appropriation of the cholo/a as well as foreclose substantial racial crossover. Instead of opening up feminist popular culture to Latino cholo subcultural interventions and subversions, the artists carefully reassert and maintain white privilege through the process of abstraction. The chola is reduced to a style and attitude – a set of clothes, make-up, and gestures— which are depoliticized, dehistoricized and abstracted from the economically and racially circumscribed social conditions of the Latinos who create and live the cholo/a lifestyle.

Lean like a Cholo; Fight like a Chola



Figure 2.3 From the cover of the book *Cholo Style*, this picture shows the unique clothing style, body posturing and relationship of the cholo to lowrider culture.⁵

The identifier “cholo,” refers to a subcultural identity of young, mostly second and third generation Mexican Americans living in the American Southwest, particularly California. The cholo is often associated with urban Chicano gangs, and, as ethnographer James Vigil describes, has “a distinctive style of dress, speech, gestures, tattoos, and graffiti.”⁶ The Mexican-American cholo and his gangster mystique is a controversial figure which generates both fear and respect from other Mexican Americans and Anglos. For middle-class Mexican Americans struggling against over a century of derogatory representation in film and newspapers as criminals, greasers, and bandits, the cholo, and white fascination with the cholo, generates frustration when he serves as a disreputable metonym for all Latinos.⁷ At the same time, mainstream white culture is titillated and terrified by the violent, non-conformist, racially conscious brown gangsters who refuse “to stay in their place — whether that place [is] social (for example, lower class or subservient) or physical.”⁸

The term “cholo” originally described indigenous Latin Americans who learned the mannerisms of city people.⁹ While initially intended as an insult, this usage captures the “in betweenness” of the cholo: on the one hand, he is too *pocho* or Americanized according to Mexican nationals or first generation Mexican Americans. On the other hand, his brown skin and “brown pride” cast him as an inassimilable racial “other” in the U.S. Vigil describes, “although cholos are Americanized, either by accident or by design, they refuse or are unable to be totally assimilated.”¹⁰

Even as the cholo represents a stigmatized identity, often cast as criminal or violent, the cholo was re-signified in the 1960s as a symbol of nationalist pride during the Chicano power movement precisely because of his refusal to accede to dominant Anglo expectations.¹¹ In the context of social devaluation, racism, poverty, and lack of opportunity confronting second generation Mexican Americans, the fierce cholo along with his 1940s zoot-suit wearing predecessor, the pachuco, has been valorized in Chicano nationalism as “an urban warrior” and “a legendary figure of counterhegemonic masculinity for Chicano nationalists.”¹² Reflecting what some sociologists have called a “hyper-masculinity,” Ramirez suggests the bravado of the pachuco and cholo “served as an anodyne for an injured... Chicano masculinity.”¹³ Luis Valdez’s play *Zoot Suit*, immortalizing the pachuco at the time of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial in 1943, captures the masculine mystique associated with the pachuco:

*It was the secret fantasy of every bato
In or out of the Chicanada
To put on the Zoot Suit and play the Myth
Más chucote que la chingada” (most fucking pachuco of all/fucking gangster)¹⁴*

The mystique of being ‘the most gangster’ carries both inflections of being tough — violent, able to stand up to any physical attack — as well as smooth or cool in the competitive heterosexual arena, two traits that make the cholo figure appealing to youth across racial lines.

As an evolving inner-city subcultural identity, a complete catalog the *cholo* style would be necessarily partial and out of date as soon as it was attempted. However, Pink’s portrayal of the cholo in the opening figure does invoke a certain archetypal “old school” cholo look, circa 1990s: Chinos (black or khaki, straight or ‘draped’), sometimes cut off below the knee and paired with knee high socks, a white tank top informally known as a “wife beater,” a plaid shirt sometimes buttoned only at the top, and a bandana tied around the head while perched on a “lowrider” bike. Sports jerseys, striped oversized polos, and mutually intertwined influences from African American hip

hop culture mark more recent looks, while zoot suits of the 1940s, such as drapes and hats, continue to influence an old school look which still circulates in cholo fashion.



Figure 2.4 One of David Gonzales' "Homies" characters, "Cruzer" displays one style of cholo including draped pants reminiscent of zoot suit, plaid shirt buttoned only at the top, dark glasses or "locs" and the trademark cholo lean.¹⁵



Figure 2.5 The tattoo across the chest of Chicano Boxer Cain Velasquez reflects the cholo tattoo tradition with the use of old English or "gothic" style lettering, part of the cholo graffiti tradition and an explicitly racial consciousness in "Brown pride."¹⁶

Though not all youth who emanate *cholo* style participate in gangs or criminal activities, there is a certain *machismo* which entails a hyper-local territorial loyalty and violent fierceness. For instance, in his autobiography about Chicano gang life, Luis Rodriguez relates the allure of violent

power to the crushing effects of racial and economic oppression. He writes: “I had yearnings at the time, which a lot of us had, to acquire authority in our own lives in the face of police, joblessness, and powerlessness. [Gang membership] was our path to that”¹⁷ After being shy and fearful in grade school, Rodriguez saw the violent masculinity of gangs – “the power to hurt somebody” – as an alternative source of empowerment.¹⁸

In addition to the tough persona, the *machismo* of the cholo also connotes a certain suave, swagger, and stance, evoking a (hetero)sexual virility. For Chicano poet Tino Villanueva, what is memorable about the pachuco is his “saunter” “sway” and the way the pachuco “leans the wrong way/in assertion”¹⁹

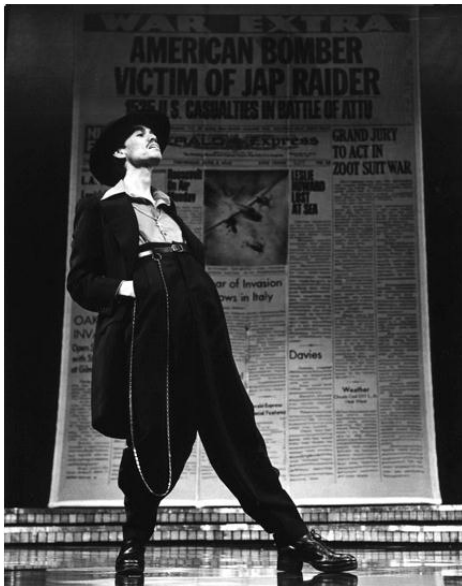


Figure 2.6 From a 1979 production of *Zoot Suit*. “El Pachuco” demonstrates the saunter, sway, and “leaning the wrong way” of the zoot suit predecessors to the cholo²⁰

Recognition of the cholo swagger is updated in the contemporary era hip-hop song “Lean like a Cholo” (2007) by Down aka Kilo. Down links the cool cholo stance to attracting women:

*All the homies they know what I mean
Baby let me show you how I lean/ (Like a cholo)
Right now I'm on the move
show this little momma how a gangsta groove
I don't do a whole lot, just enough
lean side to side, keep my elbows up.*²¹

This song suggests that not only does the *cholo* have a certain stance that attracts women, but it is imbued with detached “coolness.” He is not desperate. He does not “do a whole lot.” He does “just enough.”

In sum, *choloismo* refers to a specific urban Chicano youth subculture, which is both admired and rejected in the Mexican-American community, and both maligned and appropriated in American white culture. Dangerous, non-conformist, distinctly visual, with a poetics of body, speech, and movement, the cholo provides an alluring figure for youth (“*in and out of the Chicana*”) looking for symbols of power, masculinity, subversion, generational rebellion, and “coolness.”

White male appropriation of the cholo

As the *American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Culture* musical exhibit demonstrates, there has been a long and profound influence of Latino music and culture upon mainstream pop music – some more apparent than others.²² In the 1990s, the figure of the cholo (and the pachuco) noticeably emerged in the visual lexicon of white pop and alternative rock through appropriation of cholo clothing styles, tattoo and graffiti art styles, and linguistic appropriations. In some ways, it should be no surprise that the powerful mystique and masculinity of the cholo would appeal to young white men at a time marked by a narrative of the emasculation and displacement of white men.²³ As Henry Giroux summarizes, “white heterosexual men in America did not fare well in the 1990s. Not only were they attacked by feminists, gays, lesbians, and various subaltern groups for a variety of ideological and material offenses, they also had to endure a rewriting of the very meaning of masculinity.”²⁴ Reeling from this perception of displacement, young white men appropriated the spirit of rebellious cholo masculinity for themselves, even though it was developed by young Chicanos specifically in response to racism and economic disempowerment of Latinos – often by white men.

Cultural critics, such as Carrillo Rowe and Lindsey, note how white men in the 1990s pick up the “leftist terminologies of ‘victimization’” developed for social justice by feminists, queer communities, and/or persons of color, in order to frame themselves as the ultimate victims of social change.²⁵ Yet rather than identify the changing conditions of late capitalism as a site of their insecurity, white men in these discourses generally target “immigration, affirmative action, transnationalism and feminism” as the “sources of white male angst.”²⁶ White male angst around immigration and affirmative action reared its (ugly) head in films such as *Grand Canyon* and *Falling Down* which fantasize about overcoming emasculating confrontations with hardcore non-white “gangsters,” and in popular books and political polemics such as Peter Bimelow’s *Alien Nation* and former California Gov. Pete Wilson’s prop 187 rhetoric which warned against the dire consequences of cultural disintegration caused by shifting demographics that Mexican immigration threatened to bring.²⁷

With non-white masculinities as one source of perceived white emasculation and crisis, it seems ironic that white youth would turn to Black and Latino masculinities as a salve. Yet, alongside other hyperviolent films with white protagonists such as *Fight Club* and Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, cholo masculinities in part provide young white men a fantasy of “stylized brutality and male bonding” which combats a feminized culture “in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft and emasculated”²⁸ Thus, the desire to become, as Valdez describes. “*Más chucote que la chingada*” really did appeal to dudes (*vatos*) both in and out of the Chicano neighborhoods (*Chicanada*). And thus, cholo masculinities entered the realm of popular music in addition to film.

For example, the Oregon-based band Cherry Poppin’ Daddies released a swing dance anthem “Zoot Suit Riots” in 1994 which whitewashed the historical conflict involving racial violence between white servicemen and Chicano zoot suiters in 1943 into a romanticized tale about general teenage rebellion. Like some other accounts of the Zoot suit riots, this song frames the tension

between Latino zooters and mainly white servicemen as about sexual competition.²⁹ What is remarkable in the narrative of the song is that the ostensibly white band does not champion the white sailor. Rather, they create listener identification with the Zoot suitor. They sing, “zoot suit riot, put a comb through your coal black hair,” and then describe the hero as a “whipped up jitterbuggin’ brown eyed man” with “hot music” running through his veins. Because of his prowess in music and dance, they taunt “now you sailors know where your women come for love.³⁰” Rather than try to compete with the Latino lover, with his zoot swagger that attracts the women, the white artists in this band don the zoot suit and become the pachuco themselves, abstracting the character from its specific racial location, and through a catchy popular song, make this swagger available to their white fans.

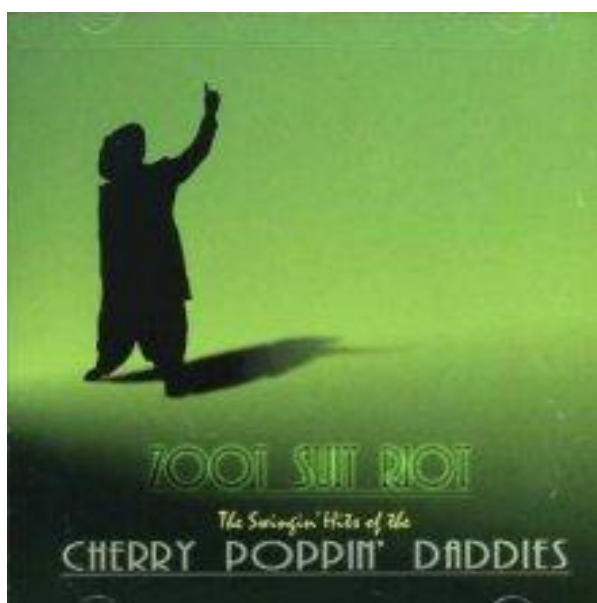


Figure 2. Zoot suiter on the cover of Cherry Poppin Daddies’ single, “Zoot Suit Riot”³¹

Drawing on more contemporary versions of Latino masculinity, white ska/alternative bands picked up the stylizations of the cholo in order to emphasize both toughness and sexual competitiveness. The Southern California based band Sublime use the fashion, tattoos, and language of the cholo to brand their masculinity. For instance, Sublime uses the old English lettering style tattoo for the cover of their self-titled album (Figure 2.8), and dress in skater-style clothes heavily

influenced by cholo style. Additionally, they draw on cholo slang, using words such as “Heina” (hot girl) and “Sancho” (the guy your girl is cheating on you with), in their song “Santeria,” which is a tale of heterosexual recuperation and revenge:

*If I could find that Heina, and the Sancho that she's found
I'd pop a cap in Sancho and I'd slap her head around*³²

The song also includes the phallic visual of: “I'd put that [gun] barrel straight down Sancho's throat.”

Thus, Sublime uses cholo masculinity to re-assert their patriarchal dominance over women, and other male competitors, which ironically are ostensibly Latino men.

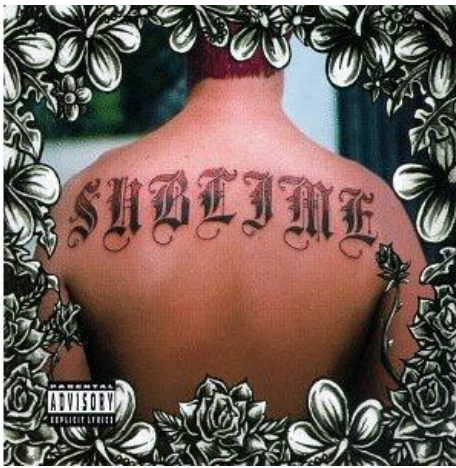


Figure 2.8 Sublime’s late lead Singer Brad Nowell’s tattoo invokes the cholo tattoo tradition³³

But if the subculture of the cholo involves “Brown Pride,” and explicit racial consciousness and development under specific historical conditions of racial oppression, how then do white performers pick up the cholo without completely displacing themselves, white men, as central? Another Sublime song, “April 29th” which memorializes the 1992 L.A. Riots in response to the Rodney King beating, demonstrates how these bands use abstraction to pick up certain phrases, styles, and attitudes from cholo and black hip hop culture, while stripping them of their racial specificity and politics. In lyrics of the song, Sublime quite explicitly divorces the causes of the L.A. Riots from specific racial experiences to a general one of disillusionment and empowerment through rage:

They said it was for the black man
They said it was for the mexican
But not for the white man
But if you look at the streets, it wasn't about Rodney King
It's this fucked-up situation and these fucked-up police
It's about comin' up and stayin' on top³⁴

In this song, Sublime uses a specific moment of race-based uprising in U.S. history as a symbol for restoring an embattled white masculinity. Strategically, the structural, historical, and pervasive relationship between the pursuit and exaltation of white masculinity and the oppression of communities of color is lost in the abstraction.

White male appropriation of men-of-color masculinities does more than serve a gender function, which is to shore up a generally embattled masculinity.³⁵ It also serves a racial function by ideologically containing perceived racial threats to white male centrality. By *becoming* (and thus symbolically replacing) the gangster, the white male no longer needs to fear the gangster. By abstracting the swagger of the “Latin Lover” from the specificity of the Latino and making it a swagger available to white men, the symbolic threat of population displacement, and the image of the great white father giving way to the Latino father, is mitigated and assuaged in the white imagination. This double move of gender empowerment through white racial consolidation is one I will examine more closely with our female performers. Whereas cultural critics tend to be cynical towards white male appropriation of racialized masculinities, identifying them as hegemonic moves of containment, white *female* appropriation of racialized masculinities with feminist aims tends to garner more favorable evaluations.

White Women and the Cholo/a

During the same time period when the cholo and pachuco made their rounds in masculine white popular culture, Gwen Stefani’s Southern Californian ska-band No Doubt also appropriated cholo masculinities (as well as chola femininities) to invoke a transgressive female persona. As a potentially disruptive *gender* project, the same racial critique of white male re-centering does not seamlessly transfer to No Doubt, though there is certainly something going on with whiteness.

However, something more is also at work here. For example, in No Doubt's 1995 hit, "Just a Girl," Gwen Stefani critiques stereotypes about women as weak and needing a man to take care of them. In the video for this song, Stefani underscores her pro-girl message with chola/cholo stylings. Pairing chinos with a tank top and wallet chain, Stefani invokes the masculine uniform of the cholo, while her teased hair, shaped eyebrows, and dark lipstick directly references the chola.



Figure 2.9 Gwen Stefani in "Just a Girl," sporting the masculine chinos, wallet chain, and white tank top of the cholo style on the *left*, and hyperfeminine high coifed hair, pencil thin eyebrows and red lips of the chola on the *right*.³⁶

Simultaneously tough and feminine, invoking the masculine power of the cholo bravado with the sexual agency and hyperfemininity of the chola, it seems a different kind of symbolic work is happening when Gwen Stefani racially cross-dresses than when the all-male white bands do. This different kind of symbolic work is at turns feminist, discursively seductive, deeply problematic and steeped in uneven relations of power and racial inequality. Before analyzing the way that white

female performers have used the cholo and the chola in their pop cultural productions, I would like to further illuminate the complex figure of the chola.

Enter La Chola (La Pachuca): Feminist Transgressor

Although reviled by Anglo reformers and Mexican parents alike, Pachucas created an affirming vision of racialized womanhood that became a key marker of new Mexican American female identity.

—Elizabeth Escobedo³⁷

The Pachuca's attire, hair, and makeup, their use of unconventional slang, their putatively innate propensity for violence and crime, their suspected association with gangs, and their alleged promiscuity were regarded ...as indicators of their rejection of a socially sanctioned – namely middle-class, Mexican immigrant- femininity.

—Catherine Ramirez³⁸

White female performers are not the first women to utilize cholo masculinity for a transgressive gender project. The pachuco and cholo female counterparts – pachucas and cholas – have been cross-dressing and transgressing boundaries of femininity for generations. However, while the zoot suiter and pachuco have been lauded as “the avatar of an oppositional ... cultural identity and as a harbinger of the chicano movement,” the pachuca and chola have not been celebrated in the same way. Because the chola and her predecessors the pachuca violate the *racial* bounds of white patriarchy, the norms of *class* — respectability and propriety — for both white and Chicana feminism, as well as the *gender* and *sexual* values of Chicano nationalism, she has been erased and ignored on a number of representational fronts, both progressive and otherwise.

And yet the figure of the chola erupts with frequency in the popular musical imaginations of Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga. Further, when these white female performers pick up masculine aspects of the cholo, it is almost always mediated through the figure of the chola. When compared to the ideals of third wave feminism: contradiction, juxtaposition of hyper-femme/masculine toughness, marked visual culture of style and difference, sexual agency, and generational rebellion and irreverence, the chola serves as a spectacular vehicle for a transgressive gender discourse.



Figure 2.10 Cholas in the 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca* (My Crazy Life).³⁹



Figure 2.11 “Sweet Pea” — one version of a chola from 2009 — shows a juxtaposition between the hyperfeminine make-up and hair with masculine markers of gun and clothing.⁴⁰

Starting with the Pachuca/zoot suit culture of the 1940s, and continuing to the contemporary “homegirl,” the chola/pachuca represents a subculture of poor to working class, typically Mexican American, who are deemed “dangerously masculine” while at the same time

“monstrously feminine” because they hang out on street-corners (or other male dominated public spaces) and fight like men.⁴¹ Arising during the World War II-era, a particular moment in history when the conspicuous consumption of the zoot suit and the appearance of non-productive leisure challenged the dominant codes of war time sacrifice, the pachuca and her stylistic offspring, the chola, represents rebellion and subversion against a host of raced, classed, and gendered structures set against her. Like the cholo, the chola is very much an intersectional character shaped by marked and often stigmatized positions of race, class, and gender.

The chola is visually identifiable by subculturally specific hair, makeup and clothing styles. And, while she may or may not participate in a gang, she is imbued with the same dangerous allure of violence and bravado as the cholo. Further, as a public, street inhabiting, and racially marked woman, her image is almost always sexually charged. These attributes form two key interrelated aspects of the chola that makes her an alluring subject for appropriation in the music videos of white women. First, the chola is the quintessential hybrid of the third wave feminist sensibility of exaggerated femininity and tough masculinity. And second, the cholas and pachucas have long negotiated the ascription of loose sexuality associated with public or street occupying women, using a number of strategies to shift from a role of sexual object to that of sexual agent.

While third wave feminism has recently valorized the juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity for disrupting the naturalness of either category, pachucas and cholas have long been combining masculinity with hyper-feminine make-up and hair-styles in what Miranda calls “a mixed economy of gender.”⁴² For example, in the 1940s, pachucas often combined the masculine zoot suit (or parts of it) with “an exaggeration of ‘girl’ through the pronouncement of lips and hair.”⁴³ The pachuca’s distinctive make-up style – pencil-thin eyebrows, dark lipstick or lipliner, pronounced dark eye-liner — has spanned the decades and remains a distinctive characteristic of contemporary cholas. Though hair styles change over time, the “up-do” of the pachucas, with the use of “rats” or foam rollers to “lift their hair into a high bouffant” has iconic status.⁴⁴ Ramirez

suggests that the hyperfemininity of the Pachuca's hair and make-up is unsettling because it "distorted a look popularized by Hollywood's leading ladies as the time" which re-formed and "undermined exclusionary definitions of ladyhood" – those based on white femininity – as well as allowed racially and economically marginalized women to claim the culture and visibility of glamour for themselves.⁴⁵ For Michelle Habel-Pallán, the adoption of Hollywood glamour "femme fatale" look not only signifies a rejection of domesticity and "the traditional homemaker and role and wife and mother" but also the "rejection of racialized assumptions around domestic labor and class privilege."⁴⁶ Thus, the pachuca/chola look emerges as a challenge to a vortex of a number of cultural, economic, and racial pressures, such as gender norms from Catholic Mexican cultural immigrant assumptions about proper femininity and the role of women, the economic conditions that disrupt the middle class assumptions of domesticity because women had to leave their homes to work, and dominant American norms of beauty and femininity based around a white normative ideal.

Combined with the hyperfemininity of hair and make-up are the masculine appropriations of clothing, behaviors and space. Alongside heavy make-up and long nails, many pachucas and cholas also wear elements of male attire. From the zoot suits, to chinos, tank tops and plaid shirts, cholas and pachucas have been cross-dressing all or in part for decades. However, as the chola "Sweet Pea" figured above (*figure 2.11*) demonstrates, rather than simply "dragging" the male cholo, the combination of the typically masculine designations of guns, gang-signified bandanas, and plaid shirts are re-worked on a female body to create hybrid masculinities. Halberstam notes "often the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results."⁴⁷ A similarly "unholy union" includes the way the high bouffants of the pachucas in 1940s also became symbols of masculine behavior, because the "rats" were places that pachucas could hide knives, razors, and cigarettes. Thus, the very site of their femininity also becomes the potential site of its betrayal or undermining.

Cholas are also signified as masculine because of their toughness. Anthropologist Laura Cummings describes, “Pachucas were said to be most distinguished from other girls by virtue of their reputedly armed status and willing-ness to fight, being described as *bravas* (fierce), *peleoneeras* (fighters), and *chingonas* (powerful/capable/’bad’).”⁴⁸ They not only are purported to fight like men, but cholas often are associated with roaming or hanging out in “the street.” For feminist scholars of the public sphere, “the street” is a crucial site for examining gender relations. Historically, the street is where the public comes to be defined, and functions as a “a metonym” for the “masculine public sphere.”⁴⁹ Chola/pachuca occupation of the street is particularly significant because: “females are socialized to avoid streets for fear of harassment and rape, to expect to become objects of the male gaze if they make themselves too visible by loitering or even walking slowly.”⁵⁰ Because the streets signify as danger zones for women, the chola subverts gender hierarchies by claiming the street for themselves. In order to protect themselves, they appropriate certain masculine performances, such as toughness and willingness to fight, and as I’ll discuss below, homosocial alliances (often gangs).

Her juxtaposition of performative femininity with a masculine fierceness is one key attraction the chola holds for the contemporary feminist imagination. The cholas’ history of negotiations with the pitfalls of public sexuality for women may be another. Because she occupies male dominant spaces and transgresses norms of femininity – especially as a racialized woman – the chola tends to be objectified sexually, or condemned as sexually “loose.” At the same time, she also signifies a kind of sexual freedom, as her claims to sexuality and sexual expression tend to exceed patriarchal control. Thus, the chola constantly has to negotiate between being a sexual, desiring, public woman while resisting against being relegated to “whoredom” – a key set of issues for third wave feminist negotiation with sexuality.

Cholas and pachucas have often been maligned as promiscuous, morally suspect, or even prostitutes in both the White and Mexican cultural contexts.⁵¹ In the racially-charged environment

in which Hollywood exploits the trope of the Latin “spitfire” and sexy Latina, the exotification and sexualization of working class, “street-roaming” cholas is not surprising.⁵² One author notes, “the pachucas, whose dark looks and hip dress suggested promiscuous behavior ... provoked erotic fantasies in some Anglo observers.”⁵³ For Chicana feminist Rosalind Fregoso, pachucas were literally “the girls my mother warned me about.”⁵⁴ She notes, whereas “in some Chicano *familias*, mothers warn their daughters about lesbians. In mine, I was cautioned about pachucas – *por ser muchachas corrientes y callejeras* (cheap, street-roaming girls).”⁵⁵ Cholas have resisted this demarcation as wantonly promiscuous, fighting against being called a “hoochie” or a slut, and some pachucas in the 1940s even offered to undergo virginity tests to combat the attacks on their respectability.⁵⁶ At the same time, pachucas, and later cholas, also embrace a more overt sexuality and sexual freedom than is socially prescribed for traditional daughters of Catholic immigrant families. With gang names such as the “cherries,” “black widows” and the “bow-legs,” Escobedo says the pachucas “toyed with images of sexual familiarity and innuendo... to play up their sexuality in a manner markedly different from that of their mothers.”⁵⁷ Thus, pachucas and cholas have come to be associated with transgressive and non-procreative sex beyond the confines of the patriarchal family in ways that open possibilities for female agency around sexuality.

Of course, the street is not without its dangers. One of the primary ways pachucas and cholas are able to navigate the dangerous geographical space of the street is through homosocial alliances (such as the girl gang). Gang ethnographer Miranda summarizes that “in the public gendered space, they are susceptible to being categorized as sexual objects. The formation of an all-girl street organization contests this sexual objectification.”⁵⁸ The girl gang, or female networks amongst cholas, is not only a symbolic contestation, but also very practical and material: women intervene to help protect other women from sexual violence. Fregoso tells a powerful story about being warned, and essentially saved from a potential sexual attack, by a pachuca. When a group of guys offered to take Fregoso “cruising” to the beach, a previously unfriendly pachuca named Gloria

stepped in and prevented her from getting in the car, telling her later that the guys were “‘preparing a gang-banging’ with [her] as their victim.”⁵⁹ Even though Gloria and Fregoso were not friends before this prevented attack, Fregoso recognizes that on the streets, pachucas look out for each other in the case of sexual danger. Thus, homosocial alliance amongst cholas and pachucas creates a safety network for these women to navigate being public while not losing sexual autonomy in the ultimate sense – being raped and abandoned. Ramirez theorizes that “alternative, homosocial communities” challenged the assumption “that men can claim possession of female sexuality”⁶⁰

The combination of performative hyperfemininity with a gangster masculinity, public sexuality backed up by forms female solidarity to protect against danger, the chola presents a compelling third wave feminist figure even as her perceived lower class status and criminality makes her a controversial figure both in Latino and Anglo cultures.

The chola as third wave vehicle

The chola, at the intersection of stigmatized identities of race, class, and gender, has powerfully navigated the structural and symbolic minefields which dehumanize and disempower her. The product of her struggles – a visually and lexigraphically rich and distinctive subculture which is often disparaged as “loud,” “low class” and “uneducated” by both Anglos and elite Latinos – provides a wealth of materials for rebellious and avant garde pop cultural iconography. Based on these qualities, I argue, the chola offers third wave popular culture, particularly in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, three key symbolic moves. First, the figure of the chola builds in a combination of fierce toughness with glamorous hyperfemininity. She directly serves the third wave sensibility of disrupting gender binaries through juxtaposition of performative femininity combined with masculinity. Second, the chola’s occupation of the “street,” provides a ready metaphor for a feminist ethos of taking up space or staking a claim in traditionally male signified arenas. And third, the chola’s public sexuality, backed up by female allies, provides a vehicle to

explore female sexual agency, combining a sexual visibility while attempting to resist passive objectification.

Gwen Stefani is quite explicit about the influence of chola style on her look as a performer, and in her designs for her clothing line L.A.M.B. She reveals: "I was [always] inspired by chola girls in their baggy pants and wife beaters. It was always about a contrast between being overly girlie, with long red nails and masses of makeup, and being masculine and tougher."⁶¹ As noted in the earlier discussion about her 1996 song "Just a Girl," Gwen uses the chola as a vehicle to push against restrictive notions of gender and sexuality. Two more contemporary videos of Stefani's which are emblematic of her use of the chola include "Hollaback Girl" (2005) and "Luxurious" (2005).

"Hollaback Girl" is considered Stefani's "attitude song." It uses the stylistics of the chola to foreground toughness, and bolster her transition to a solo singer from being the only girl in an all-boys band. "Hollaback Girl" is rumored to be spurred by an insult directed at her by Courtney Love, in which Love attempted to denigrate Stefani's street credibility calling her a "cheerleader."⁶² Stefani responded by combining a cheerleader narrative with images of herself as a chola in a lowrider to suggest that if she *is* a cheerleader, she is tough, badass, and not to be messed with. The lyrics use street-style slang to encompass a tough persona:

*I heard that you were talking shit
And you didn't think that I would hear it
People hear you talking like that, getting everybody fired up
So I'm ready to attack, gonna lead the pack
Gonna get a touchdown, gonna take you out
That's right, put your pom-poms down, getting everybody fired up*

*A few times I've been around that track
So it's not just gonna happen like that
'Cause I ain't no Hollaback Girl
I ain't no Hollaback Girl⁶³*

The lyrics are paired with a video that depicts Stefani arriving to a high school campus chola-style – cruising in a yellow 1962 Impala convertible lowrider driven by her Harajuku Girls. Stefani is wearing a feminized version of the cholo uniform: a white cropped "wife beater" paired with khaki

chinos with a black bandana hanging out of the back pocket. The Harajuku Girls are wearing athletic track suits and sports jerseys. They have all paired the masculine clothing with the pencil-thin eyebrows, dark eye make-up, red lipstick and bright red nails of the chola. Stefani proceeds to march down the halls of the high school as if she owns the school, while literally being backed up by her girls. The rest of the video shows Stefani as the head cheerleader in a marching band montage.



Figure 2.12 Stefani in lowrider driven by Harajuku Girls⁶⁴



Figure 2.13 Stefani takes over the school⁶⁵

There is some ambiguity in the popular sphere as to what a “hollaback girl” is, but Stefani makes it very clear throughout the song that it is an undesirable demarcation, and whatever else she is, she certainly is *not* a hollaback girl. In what I am guessing was intended to be a tongue-in-

cheek article in the *National Review* about the hollaback girl, Peter Wood provides a surprisingly thorough etymology of the term, identifying three possible meanings of the hollaback girl (and the importance therefore of not being one). All three possible meanings have significant ties to third wave goals and the potential symbolic work of the chola in popular feminist discourse.

One possible definition of the hollaback girl is that of a second-tier cheerleader. During cheering, the head cheerleader makes a call, and the other girls “holla back.” By not being a hollaback girl, Stefani is suggesting she is the leader not the follower. She confirms by singing, “so I’m gonna attack, gonna *lead the pack*.” I explore the entanglements of race and leadership in feminist empowerment discourses more fully in chapter 5. But here is one case where the racialized chola persona is providing a vehicle for feminist claims of leadership.

Another connotation of a hollaback girl, and one particularly relevant to the discussion here, is someone who yells back or merely responds to a confrontation, instead of taking action. “I ain’t no hollaback girl” suggests that she’s not just going to take an insult, she’s going to act on it. As Wood humorously describes, “I don’t just return insults with words. I step it up.” Aaron Burr to Alexander Hamilton: “I ain’t no hollaback boy. Pistols at dawn.”⁶⁶ We see this supported in the lyrics when Stefani says to her opponent to meet under the bleachers after school to settle it, where she’s

gonna fight, gonna give it my all
Gonna make you fall, gonna sock it to you
That's right I'm the last one standing, another one bites the dust

This willingness to fight, to stick up for herself, and to replace words with actions reflects the chola and pachuca attitudes and behaviors as tough girls.

A third cultural connotation that subtends both chola identity and public femininities is the notion that a hollaback girl is a girl who positively responds to male catcalls (and thus allows herself to be sexually objectified). Stefani rejects the disempowering aspects of this connotation through the reversal of the traditionally misogynistic lowrider culture. In the video, Stefani

reverses the dynamic where men in cars cat-call women on the street. In this video, Stefani is *in* the car, driven by one of her girls.

Lowriders have long been designated the arena of men, and are an integral part of the development of a certain classed Chicano masculinity intimately tied in with pachucos and cholos.⁶⁷ Various historical developments, such as the post-World War II \$20 supplementary payments to primarily male ex-veterans, enabled men to purchase and customize used cars. Lowrider car clubs have tended to bar women from joining, even further securing lowrider culture as the domain of men. Women, on the other hand, are typically used as “car ornaments,” with scantily-clad women draped across the hoods of cars in *Lowrider* magazine or at car shows, or are painted on the hoods or trunks of the cars.⁶⁸ Thus, from a gender perspective, the lowrider represents both female exclusion from a male dominated sphere such as the streets, as well as the sexualization and objectification of women in those spaces.

Stefani uses the cholo/a imagery here to flip the gendered script of masculine car culture and female objectification by taking over the car itself. Rather than being “hit on” or sexually harrassed from occupants of the lowrider, Stefani assumes a dominant, active position in the lowrider itself. Further, in the video, Stefani’s lowrider features a portrait of herself across the hood of the vehicle (*see figure 2.12*), which could symbolize a third wave reclamation of the sexualized gaze, or an ownership of her own depiction (further elaborated on in chapter3). In sum, the figure of the chola/o serves metonymically as feminist gestures for Stefani. “Hollaback Girl” makes a claim to leadership, a refusal to back down from a challenge, and a claim to occupy public space in a visually spectacular way, supported by her “back-up” girls who are styled as cholas.

“Luxurious,” a second key Stefani song where the chola figures prominently takes a slightly different approach. In this video, Stefani uses the chola primarily to celebrate public female sexuality and hyperfeminine glamour in a way that attempts to resist objectification. Unlike the ska or pop overtones of Stefani’s other songs, “Luxurious” is an R&B ballad which reflects the musical

style of lowrider cruising culture. Stefani samples the hook from the R&B song “Between the Sheets” of the Isley Brothers to invoke the lowrider ethos of “Low and Slow” — a double-entendre which suggests it’s not about the destination, but about getting there in style.⁶⁹

The visuals of the video draw out the hyperfeminine and sensual aspects of the chola. In the opening sequence of the video, Stefani gets her very long nails done in a salon, walks slowly down the sidewalk with friends, and returns to her room where her friends hang out and make out while she does her hair and make-up. Stefani admits her inspiration for the video comes from her fascination of watching chola girls in her high school apply make-up:

I had this one vision of this girl that was from high school named Mercedes ... she's very inspiring. She's this total like chola girl, white face, and she used to sit in class and put on tons of makeup. And I used to just watch her, mesmerized. And she would just wear this dark liner and this red lipstick and she had this safety pin and she'd be picking her eyelashes apart. She hadn't taken that mascara off for months.⁷⁰

Stefani’s description of Mercedes echoes Ramirez’s description of cholas and pachucas as displaying a kind of “monstrous femininity.” On the one hand, Stefani describes a highly feminized scene of make-up application. Yet, the words Stefani chooses to describe the scene connotes an “excessive” or non-normative quality to it. For example, the chola uses “tons” of makeup, on a “white face” which highlights the artificiality of the production of (racialized) femininity. Stefani also remarks on the use of the safety pin and the idea that Mercedes hadn’t removed her make-up for “months” – suggesting a deviation from dominant norms of moderation. These together make such a monstrous spectacle that Stefani is “mesmerized.” Stefani attempts to play with these notions of excess, artificiality, and spectacle around gender through her own re-enactment of the make-up ritual.



Figure 2.14 Stefani engages in an elaborate sequence of doing her hair and make-up in the video “Luxurious.”⁷¹



Figure 2.15 Drawing her lips like a chola in “Luxurious”⁷²

In the middle section of the video, Stefani shifts into two Frida Kahlo inspired looks, both sexy and feminine. One shows her lying on a bed of candy, with her hair in Frida Kahlo braids, while wearing a shirt of the *Virgin de Guadalupe* split down the front in a provocative way, and the other shows her with flowers in her hair Frida-style, breaking piñatas.

While mostly highlighting femininity and sexual allure, using the figure of the chola still enables Stefani to juxtapose the hyperfemininity with qualities of toughness. For instance, in the

beginning of the video, Stefani is seen walking down the street, head held high in defiance, with her friends as her back-up, which is consistent with the chola trope of occupying the street. In another scene, she is seen smashing piñatas with a bat, showing not just passive sexuality, but active strength (*see figure 2.17*). And at the very end of the video, she holds up one of her sandals or “chanclas” to the camera (*figure 2.16*). Blogger Daniel Hernandez points out that this is a subculturally recognized sign of toughness: “In the codes of the classical barrio, taking off your chancla is basically saying, ‘You wanna fight?’”⁷³



Figure 2.16: As a symbol of defiance, Stefani holds up her Chancla or sandal (*left*) while the phallic bat juxtaposes masculinity with her hyperfeminine Frida Kahlo look (*right*)⁷⁴

Shugart and Waggoner label Gwen Stefani as a transgressive and resistive figure precisely because she pairs “vintage” Hollywood style with incongruent masculinity. They celebrate her pairing of “exaggerated, ostentatious, outrageous” deployment of “hypergirl” – her hair in “ultrafeminine coif,” her face featuring “exaggerated, extremely vivid shades of lipstick, eye shadow, blush, and false eyelashes” with aggressive masculine performance, stances, and clothing.⁷⁵ What Shuggart and Waggoner do not include in their theorization is how the racially specific chola is both source and inspiration for many of these stylistics pairings. What the chola provides Stefani in “Luxurious” is both a source of ironic femininity and public sexuality – what Shugart and Waggoner

posit as camp, spectacle, and excess – as well as a template for resisting passive sexual objectification – invoking agency through toughness and strength.

Fergie uses the figure of the chola in very similar ways to Gwen Stefani. Fergie's "London Bridge" is the first single from her first solo album. The song is Fergie's version of an attitude song with a provocative (or raunchy depending on perspective) sexual overtone. The lyrics of the song have been lampooned for providing "ambiguous but not complicated" sexual innuendo as she sings in the chorus:

*How come every time you come around,
My London, London Bridge wanna come down.*⁷⁶

While speculation is rife about what part of a woman's anatomy might correspond with a "London Bridge" falling down, the consensus is that the lyrics represent a desiring woman of questionable propriety – a designation often attributed to the chola, as previously discussed. Fergie underscores this tension (of sexual desire and sexual propriety) she sings:

*I'm such a lady, but I'm dancing like a 'ho,
but I don't give a f*ck so here we go.*

The video tells the story of a woman, Fergie, flanked by two dark skinned women she calls her "cholas," cruising through the streets and waterways of London. They eventually bust through the doors at a gentlemen's club, which Fergie describes is a metaphor for breaking into the ol' boys club of the music industry. Subsequently, Fergie disrobes one of the gentlemen and appropriates parts of his attire — the dress shirt, tie, and hat — wearing them in the next scene which involves table dancing for an audience of non-white men. The racial and sexual dynamics of these particular latter scenes will be explicitly discussed in subsequent chapters, but I include the description here to establish the video as using the third wave tropes of gender-bending and what Fergie calls "this whole androgynous-type thing."⁷⁷ While some critics argue against seeing this video as providing an "empowerment metaphor," Fergie herself describes it as being tough and edgy and Will.i.am describes it as about women's strength: "[She's] writing about her personal struggles and casting her

demons away and feminine power ... [It's] her singing for young girls to be strong... I know females, and I know you all are going to like this."⁷⁸

The chola appears in several ways in this video, both as Fergie herself through her clothes and makeup, and through her back-up dancers who she explicitly identifies as cholas. MTV describes: "for the video, she brought in backup dancers who double as bodyguards, dressed like cholas — tough Mexican girls known for wearing dark lipstick and big hair — to make the clip 'have a bit more edge, be very distinct, be very mixed.' Fergie swears she used to want to be a chola growing up. 'I used to do my hair and clothes in exactly the same way,' she said."⁷⁹



Figure 2.17 Fergie dressed with chola stylistics, flanked by her chola bodyguards⁸⁰



Figure 2.18 Fergie's cholas: a combination of tough and feminine⁸¹

One of Fergie's outfits has a distinctive chola influence: she wears a shortened white "wife-beater" tank top and cut-off chinos both visual signifiers of a feminized cholo style (*see figure 2.17*). Her make-up is informed by the trademark Pachuca-style pencil thin eyebrows, light colored eye shadow, heavy eye liner and lipstick. Her background dancers also don variations of the chola look, pairing feminine tops with cut-off jeans and sneakers. One of them has a bandana hanging from a back pocket (*see figure 2.18*). Both the back-up dancers have their hair in a high ratted bouffant pony tail, coupled with shaved sides — a combination of exaggerated feminine and tough masculine look — and both wear the distinctive make-up style. The early portion of the video features a lowrider cruising the London streets, with another scene showing the cholas dancing in front of the car. The figure of the chola also circulates in the attitude, slang and style of the lyrics when Fergie orders people to "get up out her face, before I spray your ass with mace..."⁸²

By bolstering Fergie with street bravado, the figure of the chola provides the toughness and attitude --"the edge"—to underwrite Fergie's move into male dominated spaces, such as the male dominated music industry. The chola also helps Fergie balance a persona as a sexually desiring woman with the ascription of being a "whore." For instance, her lyrics "I'm such a lady but I'm dancing like a 'ho" demonstrates the push and pull between wanting to be considered a lady, but wanting to express sexually, and to resignify the controlling narrative of "whore." This tension also arises when she invokes another racialized sexuality, an orientalized sexuality, by singing "I'm Fergie Ferg, and I love you long time." "Love you long time" cites a scene from the movie *Full Metal Jacket* in which a Vietnamese prostitute solicits American soldiers. The phrase circulated in hip hop songs such as 2 Live Crew's "Me so Horny" and Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back." While Fergie invokes this explicitly sexual phrase, she immediately bolsters this potentially vulnerable and exploitable sexuality with her chola backup when she pairs the lyrics:

*Fergie love em' long time
My girls support right?*

Fergie mitigates the danger of a stigmatized sexuality with a call for homosocial support from her cholas. In part, it is because she has her “girls” that Fergie is able to express sexual agency via grinding against the queen's guards, undressing one of the gentlemen in the club, and table dancing in front of a room full of men. In an interview about “London Bridge,” Fergie supports this focus on homosocial support by describing it as a song about “going to clubs and hanging out with my girls,” even as the clublike dance scene at the end is primarily populated by men watching Fergie dance. But her desire to “get buck wild” is enabled, she implies, by her connection to the female bodyguards who protect Fergie in these public spaces, and public displays of sexuality.⁸³

In short, Fergie seeks empowerment through the appropriation of the racially “other” chola who enables her to explore public performance and displays of sexuality. At the same time, the street toughness of herself as chola, with back-up from her “bodyguards,” enables her to contest victimization and complete objectification in these male dominated spheres. However, as I will argue later, Fergie also uses the privileges of whiteness (such as deploying ethnicity and racial signifiers as accessories rather than structural identities) to distance herself from risks associated with a complete identification with the chola, and in doing so, ultimately contains and subsumes the chola in service to white femininity.

Lady Gaga’s stylistic arsenal is also informed by the chola. In addition, Lady Gaga’s New York background has shaped her appropriation of tough Latina personas to include not only cholas (typically of California and the Southwest), but also to include Dominican and Puerto Rican influences. Yet, the scenes, phrases, symbols, and allusions to these other fierce Latina personas operate with much the same symbolic payoffs as the chola: fierceness paired with hyper-glamour, spectacular visual display, and navigating public sexuality while resisting objectification.

In line with Hollywood depictions of urban Latinas as criminals, the chola makes her appearance in Lady Gaga’s video “Telephone,” in the opening prison scene. The prison scenes foregrounds Lady Gaga’s toughness to frame the tone and message of the song which essentially

tells a male suitor to “back off” when she’s busy doing other things. Lady Gaga rejects the constant calls and surveillance of a male lover when she’s out dancing and partying:

*Boy, the way you blowin' up my phone
 Won't make me leave no faster
 Put my coat on faster
 Leave my girls no faster*

*I shoud've left my phone at home
 'Cause this is a disaster
 Callin' like a collector
 Sorry, I cannot answer⁸⁴*

In line with third wave sensibilities, the toughness of this stance is balanced with Gaga glamour and hyper-femininity, allowing Gaga to perform masculinity (or toughness) without having to become a man, and femininity and sexual display without becoming a passive object. And, in concert with the overall topic of this chapter, Gaga works through this key third wave problematic in part through the figure of the chola and a particular image of a *Dominicana* performer, Maluca Mala.

The video opens in a prison yard of a jail located in Lincoln Heights, CA, a working class Chicano and Mexican immigrant neighborhood east of downtown Los Angeles. The location is visually identifiable by its proximity to the cement paved Los Angeles River which has appeared in a number of films, including iconic Chicano based films such as the gang/prison film *Blood in Blood Out* and *Stand and Deliver*, a film about inner city kids who excel against the odds. The prison yard and commissary is disproportionately occupied by black and Latina inmates. Most of the Latinas are dressed as cholas with bandanas, tattoos, white tank top and chinos and/or high-ratted hair. The camera panning across these women of color is interspersed with a prominent make-out scene between Lady Gaga and white butch lesbian performance artist Heather Cassils, and a cameo of Lady Gaga’s sister Natali, (who is Italian, but easily reads as Latina stylistically in this context).



Figure 2.19 Lady Gaga surrounded by tough women of color in prison⁸⁵

Before the music of “Telephone” even begins, two other Lady Gaga songs play in the background which provide context for the prison scene. They are Lady Gaga’s “Paper Gangster” and “I like it Rough” – two songs that also invoke the theme of toughness. In her 2009 song, Lady Gaga uses the term “paper gangster” to signify someone who is a poseur, i.e., someone who seems to have the swagger of a gangster, but does not have the actual substance to back it up. She sings:

*dont want no paper gangsta
wont sign away my life to
someone whose got the flavor
but dont have no follow through⁸⁶*

In this sense, a paper gangster seems like the male version of a hollaback girl – someone who is all talk and no action. In “I like it Rough,” Lady Gaga juxtaposes “roughness” with feminine glamour when she suggests to her male suitor:

*Your love is nothing I can't fight
Can't sleep with the man who dims my shine
...
'Cause it's a hard life with love in the world
And I'm a hard girl, loving me is like chewing on pearls...⁸⁷*

In both of these songs, Lady Gaga uses the urban, cholo and/or hip hop signifiers of “gangster” and “hard life” as metaphors for the difficulty of heterosexual relationships and negotiating or re-

negotiating gender expectations. These uses of toughness and gang life as metaphors in turn frame the scene for her newly expanded metaphor of being in prison in “Telephone.”

After making out in the yard, Lady Gaga receives a phone call — the center point of the lyrics of the song. At this point she takes on the visual performance of the Dominican rap-techno artist Maluca Mala, with distinctive make-up and cans in her hair as rollers. Although Lady Gaga does not explicitly acknowledge the citation, the parallel symbols, such as the distinctive make-up, leather jacket, and cans-as-hair-rollers look that cross both this video and Maluca Mala’s video “El Tigraso” suggests an intertextuality worth unpacking, especially since the message and attitude of Maluca Mala’s work reverberates in Lady Gaga’s video.



Figure 2.20: A side by side comparison of Lady Gaga and Maluca Mala⁸⁸

Maluca Mala (aka Natalie Yeppez) is a New Yorker of Dominican descent who defines her music as “experimental tropical punk, ghetto tech, and hip-house.”⁸⁹ Her bilingual techno-mambo song “*El Tigraso*” is about street harassment of women in her neighborhood. She says:

Dominicans call the bad boys on the corner who are up to no good – but who have mad swag – *Tigeres*. ‘*El Tigraso*’ is the game or swag. Growing up, I would go visit my cousins or grandma uptown. Back then, you couldn’t get from one corner to the next without those ‘*Tigeres*’ trying to holler at you. It was kinda outta control... So the song ‘*El Tigraso*’ is poking fun at that whole situation.⁹⁰

Even as Maluca Mala complains about the street harassment, the video shows her proudly walking down the street, riding a bicycle, and dancing in the club while rolling her eyes at the *tigeres* who hit on her, shaking her head and finger while mouthing “no no no.” Like the cholas and pachucas, Maluca Mala’s video invokes the historical trailblazing of fierce young Latina women daring to occupy male dominated space despite the dangers, displaying both exaggerated femininity (i.e., the bigger than life hair curlers and make-up) coupled with bravado and attitude. Lady Gaga imbibes this ethos in the opening sequences of the video by using iconic urban Chicano geography as a backdrop, using cholas as fellow prison inmates, and using these uniquely identifiable stylistic appropriations in terms of hair and make-up.

In the second part of the “Telephone” video, Lady Gaga gets out of jail through the help of Beyoncé and the two embark in a “Thelma and Louise” revenge plot during which they poison Beyoncé’s boyfriend and everyone else in a rural diner and then escape in an iconic lowrider truck.



Figure 2.21 Lady Gaga and Beyoncé with the “Pussy Wagon” in “Telephone”⁹¹

If, as Robert Young contends, words carry “semantic echoes” of their previous meanings and contexts, then the multiply appropriated yellow lowrider called the “Pussy Wagon” is a veritable echo chamber.⁹² The “Pussy Wagon” was used in Quentin Tarantino’s female revenge epic, *Kill Bill I and II*. In the film series, the truck originally belonged to Buck, a white male hospital nurse who repeatedly raped and exploited the heroine of the film, “the bride,” while she was in a coma. When “the bride” awakens and remembers what Buck has done to her, she brutally kills him and drives off in his truck, the Pussy Wagon. The Pussy Wagon, then, is a symbol of Buck’s (failed) misogyny and womanizing; “pussy wagons” in street vernacular refer to vehicles designed to attract women and yet labeling its intention on the back of the truck seems to undermine this strategy. When the bride kills Buck and drives off in his truck, she re-appropriates the very symbol of gender oppression to one of revenge. The Pussy Wagon comes to symbolize her masculinity without men. When Lady Gaga and Beyoncé come to drive the same Pussy Wagon as their getaway vehicle from their own revenge killing in the diner, the notion of women trumping men reverberates through the re-signification of the symbol of misogynistic oppression into a symbol of female toughness and empowerment.

Yet, the vehicle itself seems to be endowed with some kind of mystique, even if ironic mystique, that transcends the female-revenge story. The yellow souped-up truck repeatedly makes top lists of the most iconic cars in film —lists usually compiled by men.⁹³ After the movies wrapped, director/creator Quentin Tarantino took possession of the truck and is known to drive the Pussy Wagon around town as his personal vehicle.⁹⁴ And here is where I think the ethos of the cholo is operating.

Even though the supposed originator of the Pussy Wagon in *Kill Bill* is a white redneck guy from Texas, the truck style does not reflect a typical white male Texan truck culture. Rather, the Pussy Wagon more closely reflects Chicano lowrider sensibilities. The truck has been lowered below stock height. The bright yellow exterior paint, customized red plush interior and stylized

wording on the back reflect the lowrider tradition of customization and ornamentation.⁹⁵ And the coolness of the vehicle, what makes Tarantino and other men still want to drive it, necessarily transcends the failed white masculinity of Buck or the feminist revenge story. Instead, it attempts to signify that Tarantino and his fans have the proper swagger to appropriate Chicano urban masculinity that Buck failed to properly handle. Tarantino is known for (both celebrated and critiqued) appropriating non-white masculinities in his work, and the Pussy Wagon is no exception. In the video “Telephone,” and in line with third wave sensibilities, the narrative of female revenge and escape is made possible by her ability to borrow cholo lowrider swagger for herself. Lady Gaga’s message of feminist empowerment in this case is thoroughly intertwined with the racial dynamics of white appropriation of non-white masculinity.

In another instance, Lady Gaga’s use of the word “chola” in “Born this Way” raised considerable controversy. In her anthem celebrating diversity and tolerance, Lady Gaga lists “chola” amongst a range of sexualities, races, classes, ethnicities, and abilities:

*Don't be a drag, just be a queen
Whether you're broke or evergreen
you're black, white, beige, **chola** descent
you're lebanese, you're orient
whether life's disabilities
left you outcast, bullied or teased
'Cause baby you were born this way*

*No matter gay, straight, or bi,
Lesbian, transgendered life
I'm on the right track baby I was born to survive
No matter black, white or beige
Chola or orient made
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to be brave⁹⁶*

The proximity of the word “chola” to the phrase “born to be brave” prompted at least one blogger to positively conclude “the use of Chola, besides serving as an awkward short-hand for Latinas, might be an attempt to play on the image of the Chola as a street-smart, empowered woman.”⁹⁷ This would be consistent with the way Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga attempt to circulate the

figure of the chola in their earlier work. In the video of “Born this Way,” deconstructed elements of cholo/a style — cut off chinos, tank tops, wallet chains, and tattoos— serve as symbols of androgyny in a group dance scene to represent her version of a post-race, post-gender world.⁹⁸ Men wearing skirts dance alongside women with shaved heads, both wearing variations of androgynous street style of the cholo/a.

However, several Chicano political organizations have expressed concern about her use of the word “chola” in the lyrics. *Chicanos Unidos Arizona* and *MEChA* both challenge Lady Gaga’s use of chola as a racial signifier, particularly because it seems to collapse all Latinos into this term, much like she collapses Asian identity into the term “orient-made.”⁹⁹ Both these Latino groups are concerned about the conflation of Latino culture with “chola” because they argue the chola is derogatory or even racist term, in that it has a lower-class, uneducated, and criminal connotation. In fact, the spokesperson for *Chicanos Unidos Arizona* went as far as to equate the use of the term “chola” to describe Latinos as equivalent to the use of the “n-word” in relation to African Americans. This controversy reiterates the idea that the chola is a stigmatized figure in elite Chicano culture and that she circulates dangerously. In other words, even as the chola provides a vehicle for third wave gender sensibilities, there is a raced and classed stigmatization associated with the figure. Because of this, these Chicano cultural groups, as well as these white female artists, never fully identify with the cause of the chola. Rather, she serves merely as a visual and lyrical accessory, rhetorical shorthand for specific attitudes and feminist positions. But her history, her socio-political context, and ultimately her voice are all displaced by these representations.

Displacing the Chola: Empowering *White* Femininity

If evaluated from a gender-only viewpoint, the use of the figure of the chola to further certain empowerment discourses such as toughness and sexual autonomy seems to advance feminist goals, and thus is praise-worthy. However, when examined through an intersectional or racially conscious lens, the cross-racial appropriation of Latino subcultures by white female artists

has troubling implications. Despite the arguments from rock historians that racial crossover music is “an indicator that cultural barriers [are] dwindling,” and that “musical exposure between racial groups” leads to a “greater level of cross-cultural appreciation,” many critical race scholars argue that appropriation by white musicians has merely shifted the racial politics from overt segregation to an aesthetization of race which ultimately serves to re-center whiteness and maintain the racial status quo.¹⁰⁰ Abstraction and commodification of race in popular culture strips away the historical context of racial difference and contributes to a “colorblind” or “postrace” discourse of race which delegitimizes racial protest. This in turn not only leaves white privilege unquestioned and naturalized, but also tends to reassert the primacy of whiteness. Symbols of racial difference get reduced to what bell hooks described as “personal metaphors” for whites to work through their fears and aspirations.¹⁰¹ In the specific cases presented here, the racially “Other” chola serves as a vehicle to re-work gendered subjectivities. But, as gender is always racialized, how white women use tropes of brown femininity necessarily plays out on the field of what Maria Lugones calls the “modern/colonial gender system” – one in which hierarchies of race deeply inform gendered possibilities.¹⁰²

While it may seem progressive to include representations of marginalized Latino/a subcultures in the broader cultural industries, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga use elements of chola style only as metaphors, as style, or as a marker of appearance, while still maintaining a white “base” identity. None of the three artists fully identifies as a chola in ways that would legitimate or increase representative opportunities for cholas in the broader pop culture landscape. Rather, the artists slip in and out of chola style within the videos themselves, modulating the figure of the chola often with iconic displays of white femininity, or markedly upper class identities. For instance, both Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga pair platinum blond hair with their chola appropriation. And in each of the videos discussed, the scenes in which the performers appear as the chola are cut back and forth with the performers as something else – usually a display of iconic white femininity. This suggests

that the racial characteristics of the chola are temporary, and/or that the chola becomes a “mood” or “style” that the artists can pick up and discard at will. For example, in “London Bridge,” Fergie titrates her chola look with a blond “Bridget Bardot” look when she enters the gentleman’s club.¹⁰³ Gwen Stefani switches from chola to blond cheerleader in “Hollaback Girl,” and from the chola to a blond version of the upper-class light-skinned Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in “Luxurious.” And Lady Gaga moves from Maluca Mala in prison to a yellow-haired Marilyn Monroe in “Telephone.” Thus, even as these artists flirt with notions of racial difference, they always keep at least one foot anchored in white femininity. As bell hooks confirms in “Eating the Other”:

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.¹⁰⁴

When Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga appropriate the figure of the chola for their feminist or gender empowerment moves, they also “affirm their power-over” relations with regards to race in three key ways: through abstraction such that the racially subversive chola persona is dehistoricized and depoliticized, through marking the chola as temporary in such a way that white femininity is exalted in comparison, and through economic appropriation, or more bluntly, cultural theft.

Abstracting and Decontextualizing the Chola

Shugart and Waggoner argue that in feminist popular culture, decontextualization of gendered styles helps to undermine and denaturalize essentialist beliefs about gender and sex. They argue, “In Stefani’s case, excess assumes a subversive sensibility... her pairing of extremely feminine, typically sexualized articles of clothing with other, totally incongruous items functions to decontextualize them.”¹⁰⁵ This decontextualization, they believe, opens gender up for subversive,

feminism and progressive new possibilities to emerge. However, Shugart and Waggoner fail to acknowledge that much of the creative material that Stefani uses to subvert restrictive gender norms comes from the cholo/chola subculture.¹⁰⁶ Thus, these performances are not only tied up with gender, but also carry implications of race, ethnicity, and class. Bell hooks, on the other hand, argues that decontextualization of race and racial difference has damaging effects on social justice goals. She writes that the “process of decontextualization” and the “commodification of difference” “promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated... by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history.”¹⁰⁷ Drawing on histories of imperialism, primitivism, and black cultural appropriation, bell hooks describes the decontextualization of racial and ethnic symbols as a form of “consumer cannibalism,” which functions as an alibi to sublimate histories of white supremacy and cultural struggle.¹⁰⁸

Theorists of colorblind or post-race discourses have suggested that in the current political environment, the way race is abstracted — reduced to commodities, styles, and symbols — tends to obscure racial inequalities, history, and continuing white privilege. Charles Gallagher describes it this way: “the new color-blind ideology does not ... ignore race; it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities [so that] race becomes nothing more than an innocuous cultural signifier.”¹⁰⁹ Once abstracted from communities of struggle and structural histories of racial inequality, Ralina Joseph suggests, post-race symbolism “affirms hegemonic notions of whiteness” and “assuages dominant anxieties and guilt about current privilege and historical inequities.”¹¹⁰ Looking specifically at the dehistoricization of cholo style, these extractions not only turn “race” into an “innocuous cultural signifier,” as Gallagher puts it, but specifically silence and undermine the political, racially conscious aspects of the cholo/a.

Scholars of hip hop have noted that as the music has become commercialized and mainstreamed to wider and whiter audiences, the stridently political themes about racial justice or agitation have been sidelined to rap with more marketable ultra-materialistic (bling) or hypermasculine (gangsta) themes. A similar depoliticization of the cholo/a emerges in the examples discussed in this chapter. Like hip hop, the cholo persona is not just a subculture that happens to be Chicano and thus racialized in dominant white discourse. Rather, it is a self-consciously Chicano identity – one developing *in response* to racial subordination. Cholos counter U.S. cultural devaluation with an overt discourse of “brown pride” and a refusal to fully assimilate. Cholas exhibit racial consciousness through developing personas that resist their devaluation in the racial hierarchy. In fact, Escobedo reveals that in mid-century court documents, the pachuca was often feared by Anglo culture because she exhibited a potentially militant and defiant racial consciousness. Several reform institutions even refused to accept pachuca inmates because the officials claimed they tended to stir up “racial antagonisms” between the minority groups and the white girls. Escobedo notes, “Pachucas not only embraced a persona that both highlighted and celebrated cultural difference, but many of the young women also felt no qualms in expressing discontent with their second-class citizenship in the United States.”¹¹¹ Thus, the pachuca, and later the chola, do not just transgress gender, but race as well: “by subverting mainstream consumer culture and visibly expressing discontent with the dominant society, pachucas created a racialized, collective identity that helped many Mexican American women to escape their feelings as outsiders in the United States by claiming an affirming identity *as* outsiders in the United States.”¹¹² By reducing the chola to a style or attitude in music video, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga abstract the chola from her political context, and undermine the potential challenges to white dominant ideologies about belonging, civic participation, national identity, and norms of beauty that a racially conscious chola might bring. Including the image of the chola without the politically charged context of her emergence helps to mitigate white guilt about racial privilege, because it

allows the performers and their fans to point to a multicultural sensibility as evidence of their post-racial achievement. At the same time, decontextualizing the chola works to actively maintain white racial privilege by containing or deflecting challenges to the racial status quo.

In addition to silencing overt racial opposition, scholars have also noted that colorblind discourse works to obscure the “institutional arrangements reproducing structural inequalities” as well as minimize attention to the social conditions that produce the hypermasculinity or rebelliousness of the cholo persona that attracts white youth.¹¹³ Writing about white youth fascination with black culture, Yousman argues that: “White appropriation of Black culture often takes the form of White dalliance with a culture that is valued for being oppositional and resistant, and yet this dalliance does not account for exactly what it is that catalyzes Black opposition — White supremacy and the daily suffering that many Blacks in American society must endure.”¹¹⁴ So while white youth revel in the “oppositional and resistant” qualities of black culture — or as evidenced by these videos, cholo culture — they are distanced both by social location and by what Spivak calls “sanctioned ignorance” from the social realities of violence, poverty, racism, and struggle that mark the urban areas from which these “rebellious” cultures emerge.¹¹⁵ In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Fergie admits, she:

Loves hip-hop, but she has always known she's an outsider... 'I was suburban, yet I had glimpses from where I lived. I'm hearing all the stories about what was going on in East L.A. and South Central, looking at it from the outside.. Seeing it but not really living it. So there weren't any of the negative consequences of the guns and all of that. It was just interesting and sexy'¹¹⁶

Fergie continues on to suggest that her ability to abstract hip hop from the “negative consequences of guns and all that” and just focus on the parts that are “interesting and sexy” is precisely why she is able to attract her audiences. Although she does not explicitly identify her audiences as white, she suggests they can relate to both her attraction to hip hop and her lack of first person experience. Fergie capitalizes on delivering the feel-good side of hip hop, abstracted from any uncomfortable remnants of the racial inequalities which mark its origin.

A concrete example of how structural inequality is abstracted in the work of these white performers can be seen in the way that prisons – a primary institutional site of racial differentiation for black and Latinos – are reduced to metaphors of personal freedom. For instance, a prison is featured prominently in the opening sequences of Lady Gaga’s “Telephone” video as a metaphor for resisting social constraints. According to one interpretation:

It seems like Gaga herself is also entrapped as well as being in prison... I see the metaphor in the eyes of Foucault’s ‘Discipline and Punish,’ in which he uses prison as a metaphor for how we as society produce identities. To him, the prison represents all the social factors that dictate who we are. Gaga is playing with that idea and turning it on its head by trying to create her own identity rather than let any other factors dictate what her identity will be.¹¹⁷

In a somewhat narrow reading of Foucault, the author claims the prison operates in Lady Gaga’s video as a metaphor for struggling against the social constraints on personal identity construction rather than as a symbol for institutional power or regulation. The video director Jonas Akerlund, echoing Fergie’s description of hip hop and urban ghetto life, describes the kissing scene in the prison yard as “something that is happening in both men’s and women’s jails and it is part of the picture in our made-up prison world. It was sexy and fun to play with.”¹¹⁸ Thus, in Lady Gaga’s video, prison life is transformed into a personal metaphor for exploring questions of freedom and restraint, abstracted from the physical site of state incarceration that disproportionately dispossesses black and Latino men and women.

Gwen Stefani also uses prison and being locked up as a metaphor in her “Sweet Escape” video, as well as a structuring theme throughout the same titled album. In the video, Stefani is shown as being trapped behind gold bars, in a golden jail, looking bored and wistful. She convinces a dog to bring her the key, a scene directly out of the Disneyland ride “Pirates of the Caribbean.” The second sequence shows her being trapped again, this time in a golden penthouse; she is rescued by her Harajuku Girls by letting down her golden-blond Rapunzel-like braids. They rush her off to a get-away vehicle driven by Akon, the black R&B artist who co-wrote the song – and, interestingly enough, served time in prison for theft which is reflected in his album title *Konvict*. The final scene

shows their getaway car being pulled over by the police, who are really Stefani's Harajuku Girls dressed like cops. When Gwen sees she is being pulled over, she laughs and laughs, likely in recognition that she is not *really* being pulled over.



Figure 2.22 A bored Stefani trapped behind gold bars in "Sweet Escape"¹¹⁹



Figure 2.23 the Harajuku Girls posing as police officers in hot pursuit¹²⁰



Figure: 2.24 Gwen laughing when she sees the police lights behind the getaway vehicle¹²¹

The lyrics to “Sweet Escape” suggest that Stefani wants to “get away” from relational strife, and escape to a happier place where she and her lover are not fighting. The gold-gilded penthouse-Rapunzel sequence is reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” which in part details the confinement and suffering of upper middle class white women in late 19th century who are trapped by the social constraints of white domesticity. In an interview, Stefani confirms that for her, the sweet escape is a psychological one. She describes her own music (and by extension, fashion line) as being a “sweet escape” because it provides “ear candy” or music that is easy to listen to – upbeat and not very heavy.¹²²

Comparing the depiction of prison and policing in these two videos to the videos of African American rapper Lil Kim shows dramatically different perspectives towards prison and police presence. Whereas For Stefani and Gaga the arrests are metaphoric, for Lil Kim —who grew up in a hardcore urban area of Brooklyn and actually spent time in prison for giving false testimony about a shooting — prison and police are very real. Whereas Stefani is shown in an SUV laughing when being pulled over by her stylized police, Lil Kim in her video “Whoa” shows a similar scenario which ends in her case in arrest and incarceration.



Figure 2.25 Lil Kim being arrested in “Whoa”¹²³

Lil Kim's lyrics to her song "Keep Your Lighters Up" describes the harsh realities of urban ghetto "gangster" life and the menacing effects of constant police surveillance. She sings:

*I come from Bed-Stuy
where niggaz either do or they gonna die
Police stay on us like tattoos
Niggaz only grind 'cuz we have to¹²⁴*



Figure 2.26: Depictions of police surveillance and arrests of black men in Lil Kim's "Lighters Up"¹²⁵

The comparison between these sets of videos shows that unlike Lil Kim's depictions and lyrics discussing the race-based experiences of violence and police surveillance, Lady Gaga's "Telephone" and Stefani's "Sweet Escape" abstract the prison from its racial, economic, historical, and structural implications into a personal metaphor. Angela Davis suggests that the difference between experience with prisons and only an image of prison clarifies a pretty distinctive raced and classed line. She asks:

how many of us have stood outside a prison, let alone been inside one? This is a question that quickly separates people of colour, and particularly Black people, from whites, and the poor from the affluent. Most people in the U.S. do not have direct knowledge of the penal system, although the prison has inhabited the personal and political histories of Black and poor people continually.¹²⁶

In fact, report after report shows that Blacks and Latinos are arrested, convicted, and sentenced at disproportionate rates to Whites.¹²⁷ African Americans make up almost *half* of the total prison population, and are incarcerated at almost six times the rate of whites. Latinos are reportedly

incarcerated at double the rate of whites, making up 20% of those incarcerated and could be even higher since many states do not track the ethnic data of Latinos.¹²⁸

Davis argues that prisons “perform a feat of magic” whereby they seem to resolve or at least hide social problems caused by poverty and racial marginalization, such as homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction and illiteracy. Instead they obscure the devastating effects of late capitalism through the magic social category: “crime.” Further, she highlights “the automatic attribution of criminal behavior to people of colour, especially Black and Latino/a men and women,” which shifts responsibility for social problems away from the white capitalist system to inherent flaws in people of color.¹²⁹ Thus, prisons provide not only a discursive deflection from problems of poverty and race, but provide a literal “disappearing” of problematic “coloured bodies” out of the public eye. Hence, when Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga abstract the prison to a psychological or imaginative state, they enable a double disappearance of sorts. Not only does the prison provide an alibi for the effects of racial structural inequity, but in the metaphoric gold-gilded world of white female pop culture, the harsh realities of prison itself is deflected as style.

But, I argue, the reduction of prisons to metaphor in feminist discourse is not just an incidental oversight with unfortunate but accidental consequences for racial justice. Rather, it seems to be serving a core role in the production and maintenance of white identity. The prison functions in the modern white imagination in ways similar to Toni Morrison’s argument that slavery functioned as metaphor of constraint and Otherness against which to define freedom and the white self in early American literature. Morrison suggests “the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact *create* it – like slavery.”¹³⁰ Thus, Morrison argues, the use of slavery as a metaphor, or what she calls the “Africanist presence” in American literature was not accidental or incidental, but instead is used *strategically* in fiction to “define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters.”¹³¹ The looming presence of a racialized Other is “the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free...

not helpless, but licensed and powerful.”¹³² In other words, the white self comes to know itself as free and/or empowered precisely through the comparison to others who are not free or are less powerful.

In light of these claims, if feminism is not interrogated through the lens of race, it may be all too easy to celebrate any popular depictions of “women” as free and powerful while ignoring that part of the way these women achieve that freedom and power is through using white privilege to differentiate herself from men, and other women, of color. Hence, when Stefani and Gaga abstract prisons into personal metaphors it demonstrates that race is not merely insufficiently attended to by these artists, but rather strategically helps to build and define white subjectivities. Just like when Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga become the chola, or relegate the chola as background figures for their own performance, the political, racially affirmative and defiant characteristics are not only lost, but displaced by a re-assertion of the primacy of white femininity.

Containing the chola: Reasserting the primacy of white femininity

I have quoted both Gwen Stefani and Fergie discussing their great fascination with the chola and their desire to be one. In the discussion about “Luxurious,” I noted that Stefani was mesmerized by a particular chola, Mercedes, at her high school. In the discussion about “London Bridge,” Fergie was quoted telling MTV she wanted to be a chola growing up, so she wore her hair in similar ways to the chola. Stefani has also argued in relation to her use of Harajuku style that appropriation demonstrates a real affection for the culture. “The truth is that I basically was saying how great that culture is,” she told *Entertainment Weekly*.¹³³ However, “the thing about envy,” bell hooks warns, “is that it is always ready to destroy, erase, take-over, and consume the desired object.”¹³⁴ Although the incorporation of the chola into their performances could signify an intended homage to chola culture, the effects are that the chola is repeatedly displaced and replaced by the white appropriators. In many ways, Lady Gaga, Gwen Stefani, and Fergie’s use of the chola as a temporary stylistic accessory works to invoke and reaffirm the special role of *white* femininity in the racial

hierarchy. That is, by becoming the chola, and then situating the chola as only one amongst a number of other interchangeable and temporary styles and identities, the performance preserves whiteness as the primary normative identity and relegates ethnic and racialized femininities to the realm of style.

Maria Lugones' theorizes that a "modern/colonial gender system" underwrites the relationships between race and gender, such that white women play a distinctive role in the racial hierarchy in relation to women of color. Particularly, in rigidly racially stratified communities, white women serve as the protected site of reproduction of the white race, and thus double standards have been applied towards female sexuality along racial lines. White women's chastity and fidelity have been fiercely policed, while colonized women of color have been constructed as "primitive" and sexually licentious.¹³⁵ The rigid legal prohibitions against interracial mixing are no longer in effect *de jure*, but centuries of discourses privileging the role of white femininity with regards to protecting white racial caste interests continue to haunt the racial unconscious. The construction of the chola as a temporary identity is one of the ways this discourse emerges.

In her treatise about the role of Latinas in film, Peña Ovalle makes the case that Hollywood reproduces the colonial race and gender hierarchy through the figure of the sexually available but temporary "hot Latina" in film narratives. According to Peña Ovalle, the traditional Hollywood musical is built around courtship of the white male suitor and the virginal white woman who he teaches dance to "awaken his female partner's sexual identity."¹³⁶ This courtship is interrupted or complicated by a "musical siren" – often a Latina – who attempts to seduce the white man away from his love interest. However, the lead character ultimately resists the temptation and ends up as the "legitimized social position of husband-to-be" with the white woman.¹³⁷ In these narratives, the Latina is presented as "inherently passionate" and "promiscuous," a stereotyped depiction that Peña Ovalle argues also paradoxically grants narrative agency for Latina performers.¹³⁸ This racialized sexuality as a site of agency reflects the tropes examined earlier of cholas and pachucas

navigating public sexuality as desiring women. However, what Peña Ovalle points out is the necessary *temporariness* of the Latina in the Hollywood narrative in order to affirm the white woman as the legitimate and ultimate subject of desire. Peña Ovalle elaborates: “although [the Latina’s] presence appears to diversify the media landscape, the traditions of her representation as a dancing and temporary love interest of white men in fact reinforce and reify the status quo of Hollywood representation and cultural citizenship within the United States.”¹³⁹ Ultimately, at the same time that the Latina’s “spice” adds excitement and titillation to the narrative, white women’s role as the privileged progenitor of the nation is affirmed through her repeated triumph over the Latina siren.

Part of the satisfaction derived from the cultural psychodrama where the chaste white woman beats out the sexy Latina to win the white leading man is in the containment of the “threat” of Latina sexuality to the racial composition of the nation. Right-wing diatribes against the “hyperfertility” of the Mexican immigrants, sensationalized talk around “anchor babies,” and cultural (and political) fears about demographic shifts in the American Southwest from a white to Latino majority suggest that concerns about female sexuality is deeply entangled in racial and cultural investments.¹⁴⁰ Particularly, Carrillo Rowe notes that “racial and ethnic demographic shifts within the U.S. population, particularly in the southwestern United States, have called into question the viability of United States of America because they destabilize its implicit foundation in whiteness.”¹⁴¹ Intimately tied to that fear of population displacement then, is “the threat of immigrant mothers outstripping the reproductive work of white mothers. The national fear that emerges within these texts is that the white national mother is in danger of being replaced by a brown mother.”¹⁴² Thus, the Hollywood narrative in which the white woman repeatedly triumphs as the “nation-builder” over the so-called hyper-sexual Latina, helps to assuage white racial fears.

In comparison to the Hollywood Latina, the chola within the music videos plays an even more circumscribed role since the chola invokes a perpetually adolescent femininity. For example,

Miranda describes the chola's participation in girl gangs as a way to postpone the dominant cultural expectations of marriage and family. The intense homosocial bonds in the girl gang, she suggests, enable them to suspend the heteronormative time line in a state of deferral. Additionally, Miranda concedes that cholas in gangs, because of their stigmatized social position, are perceived as unmarriageable, even amongst boy gang members.¹⁴³ Catherine Ramirez also focuses on the way the pachuca diverges from the heteronormative narrative of reproduction. She argues: "Like the prostitute and the lesbian...La Pachuca represents nonprocreative sex." In turn, she claims, nonprocreative sex by women "imperils the heteronormative family, and by extension [the nation]."¹⁴⁴ However, from the perspective of the colonial gender system, especially within a nation obsessed with the "hyperfertility" of Mexican origin women, the nonprocreative nature of the Pachuca symbolically *preserves* the white nation, and white women's exclusive role within it.

Thus, when Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga temporarily step into the sexually confident role of the chola but always return to white femininity, they gather and reaffirm the best of all positions for themselves. The threat of Latina sexuality (and motherhood) to white women's centrality in nation-building is contained through the chola's temporariness and non-procreative sexuality.



Figure 2.27 In "Big Girls Don't Cry" Fergie (*in background*) dressed as chola in tank top and khakis, catches her boyfriend buying drugs from guys dressed and tattooed like cholos.¹⁴⁵

The notion of the chola and her sexuality as temporary and adolescent plays out explicitly in Fergie's video "Big Girls Don't Cry." In the video, Fergie's scenes as the chola are contrasted lyrically and visually with white adulthood. The narrative of the video is that Fergie catches her boyfriend buying drugs in the driveway from his cholo buddies, after which Fergie packs up and leaves. The lyrics tell a broader narrative about Fergie "outgrowing" this particular relationship and lifestyle, using metaphors of childhood. She sings: "*And I'm gonna miss you /like a child misses their blanket/ But I've got to get a move on with my life. /It's time to be a big girl now.*"¹⁴⁶ Read metaphorically, with the relationship standing in for racial cross-over and exploration, Fergie describes the pleasures of racial taboo: "we'll be playmates and lovers and share our secret worlds." But ultimately she suggests the foray into chola lifestyle is not sustainable. She says, "but it's time for me to go home." "Go home" in this case could be seen as returning to the white world, as she confesses in what I read as a racial double entendre: "And I foresee the dark ahead if I stay."

Containing the Latina to a temporary status is not the only way white femininity is reaffirmed through appropriation of the chola. Rather, the white imagination is doubly assuaged when not only is the figure of the Latina contained as a temporary lover, but even the body of the Latina, and its potential racial subversion is displaced and negated when the white women become the cholas themselves.

As noted earlier, cholas and pachucas adopt styles and femininity that challenge their racialized and devalued status, and in turn, reject and subvert mainstream beauty norms that put white, particularly blond, women at the top of the beauty hierarchy. Escobedo argues, "Pachucas adopted beauty rituals that largely defied white emulation. In fact, Mexican American female zoot suiters consistently re-appropriated cosmetics in order to fashion a racial identity that challenged the vision of mainstream U.S. beauty ideals."¹⁴⁷ And, as mentioned earlier, Habell-Pallán argues that when Latina women take on the hyperfeminine *Noir* look, they challenge the racial (and class) assumptions of beauty. Thus, for these scholars, pachucas, cholas, and other Latina women

appropriate Hollywood Glamour as a way to subvert the exclusion from dominant norms of white femininity.

However, Fergie, Gwen and Lady Gaga have become the chola themselves, and thus *re-appropriate* the subverted figure of Hollywood glamour and restore it to a blond white body. Through their white bodies, the potential racially affirmative critique of the chola is neutralized and the dominance of the white heroine of Hollywood is re-affirmed. One example of this displacement occurs in “Hollaback Girl” when Stefani has a portrait of herself across the hood of the lowrider (see *Figure 2.15 above*). While from a gender-only perspective, I suggested it could represent the ability of a female to control representation in a typically misogynistic visual economy. But from an intersectional lens, this is also an example of a white woman attempting to (re)colonize a visual space normally reigned over by Latinas. In the visual practices of lowrider art, the women commonly painted as Aztec princesses, religious figures, and sexualized nudes, are Latinas. The lowrider subculture is one of the few representational spaces in U.S. popular culture where Latinas, not white women, represent the ideal body, set the standard of beauty, and are deemed the most desired. According to Denise Sandoval’s analysis of controversies over the depiction of women in *Lowrider* magazine, it is a contested space of female representation to be sure. But it is nonetheless a fundamentally Chicano one. When Gwen Stefani replaces the portrait of the Aztec goddess with her own face, the Latina is displaced (again) in favor of the white blond body — only this time, she is displaced not on the Hollywood big screen, but within her own creative neighborhood, using her own symbols of representation.

In sum, although it is valuable to have typically invisible cholas and Chicana femininities represented in mainstream popular culture, ultimately white femininity is re-centered through the containment of Latina sexuality through the temporary status of the chola, and her relegation to perpetual (non-procreative) adolescence. Further, by becoming the chola themselves, the white performers neutralize racial challenge to the hegemony of white femininity as the norms of beauty

and literally re-insert themselves as the primary and ultimate objects of desire. And, they make a lot of money doing it.

“Robbin’ the Hood”: The political economy of cultural theft¹⁴⁸

The final consideration of the problematic effects of white women using the chola persona to achieve feminist goals addressed in this chapter involves the economic disparities of appropriation. The long and short of it is that Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga make tremendous sums of money while very few cholos, or subcultural innovators from the Chicano profit from their creative efforts. Histories of cultural appropriation of black musical forms such as jazz, swing, and later hip hop have documented the substantial disparities in “award (recognition)” and “reward (compensation) structures” through which white appropriators profit over black innovators.¹⁴⁹ For instance, Perry Hall describes that the white “King of Jazz,” Paul Whiteman, made as much as a million dollars in a year in the 1920s, while Louis Armstrong, one of the most successful black jazz innovators, made less than a tenth of Whiteman’s earnings. Further, Hall points out, the now lauded jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton died in relative obscurity and “ordinary Blacks” remained “as disadvantaged and enfranchised as ever” when jazz crossed over to white audiences.¹⁵⁰ In comparison, even fewer Chicano subcultural innovators, particularly cholos and cholas, cross over economically and achieve the awards and rewards of their collective creativity. What this highlights is that there is no necessary correlation between appropriation of a cultural style and increased appreciation of the members of that community, or increased opportunities for self-representation. Thus Perry Hall describes this process as a “virtual ‘strip-mining’ of Black musical genius and aesthetic innovation” through which the “essential, social, aesthetic, and economic value of a form or instance of cultural innovation is fundamentally extracted and separated from the collective human host that cultivated it.”¹⁵¹ It is arguably an overarching structural racist system, rather than individual crimes of exploitation, that best accounts for the dramatically disproportionate rewards given to white appropriators because they deliver titillating

cultural Otherness without the messy or fearful requirement of dealing directly with people of color. However, as Fergie, Lady Gaga, and Gwen Stefani serve as examples or representatives of broader cultural systems, particularly in their roles in advancing new discourses around gender and female empowerment, it is illustrative to briefly examine where they fit in the political economy of appropriation.

When asked about her extensive use of the Japanese subcultural style “Harajuku,” Gwen Stefani joked “I was thinking about calling the album ‘Stolen Goods’ ... or it was yours and now it’s mine.”¹⁵² Stefani has made similar admissions about the chola style and its influence on her L.A.M.B. fashion line. Stefani’s intent to commodify and profit from cholo culture is clear in a still shot from *Luxurious* where Gwen Stefani displays one bracelet in Old English lettering touting the name of her brand, and another bracelet underneath, highlighted in blue, reads “SALE.”

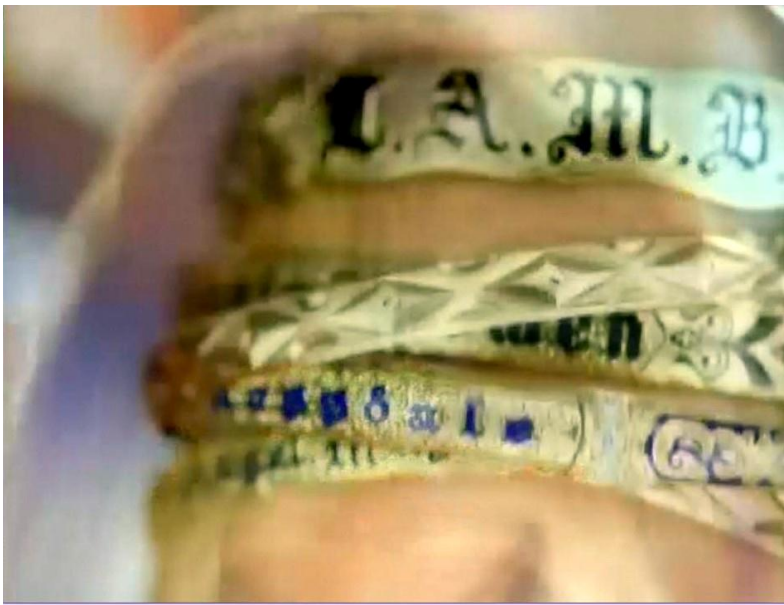


Figure 2.28 Though it only lasts a few seconds on the screen, L.A.M.B., Stefani’s brand is underscored by “Sale” highlighted in blue in the video “*Luxurious*.”¹⁵³

As noted above, the old English or gothic lettering has a key association with cholo culture and its history of graffiti. Although a *New York Times* fashion article about Stefani’s influences suggest the origins of Old English lettering in Cholo culture are “obscure,” esteemed Chicano graffiti artist, Chaz

Bojórquez reveals that Old English lettering was a way to resist/combat the feeling of illegitimacy and invisibility of urban impoverishment.¹⁵⁴ Because old English lettering was used on official documents like the *Declaration of Independence*, graffiti artists and gangs started using it in “roll calls” – the practice of listing gang members or neighborhood members in graffiti — as a subversive form of visibility and reclamation of power and importance. As Stefani *re-appropriates* the lettering style in order to sell urban edge to suburban middle class kids, the communities whose struggle and creativity added value, ethos, and mystic of cool added to the lettering style goes uncompensated. By abstracting the styles from the specific racial community from which they arise, Stefani does not necessarily generate more interest in or opportunity for urban Chicano communities to capitalize on their own cultural labor. Discussions and informal interviews with white fans suggest that the majority of white fans are not even aware of the cholo influences on Stefani’s style — though they do recognize her style as ‘tough’ or somehow urban. Instead, they comment on her uniqueness and innovation. Her perceived uniqueness and innovation has capitalized into a music, film, and fashion career that has boosted her to a net worth of \$80 million at most recent count.¹⁵⁵ In 2007, after the release of the *Sweet Escape* album, Stefani was listed by Forbes as one of the richest women in music, making \$26 million for that year alone.¹⁵⁶

Though it is tough to identify precisely who within a collective cultural practice has been slighted, occasionally a stark comparison can be made between the success of white performers capitalizing on cultural appropriation and non-white performers trying to express their own cultural sensibilities. In this case, I compare Lady Gaga and Maluca Mala.

When Maluca Mala noticed her can-as-hair-roller look had been used without credit in Lady Gaga’s video, some online commenters suggested that Mala’s complaint arose merely from jealousy that Lady Gaga had done the style more fabulously, and thus deserved more credit and compensation.¹⁵⁷ While arguably Lady Gaga and Maluca Mala both work hard to produce and materialize their dreams, the outcome of their efforts could not be more divergent. Lady Gaga is

estimated to have earned 90 million in 2010 with an overall net worth of 110 million. She is named as one of the top ten highest paid stars worldwide according *Forbes* magazine, and her wealth is steadily growing.¹⁵⁸

In comparison, Maluca Mala revealed in an interview with the *New York Times* that she is broke — not broke in the sense of she does not have as much money as she prefers, but broke in the sense that she had to move back home to live with her mother and collect food stamps.¹⁵⁹ The topic of her economic dispossession arose when the interviewer asked her if she was using the Blackberry she received when she performed in an advertisement for them, and Maluca responded, “oh yeah, they gave me a phone, but it’s not like it came with a year of service or anything. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to hate on BlackBerry, but ... having a cellphone and going out to dinner is a luxury.”¹⁶⁰ She explains that even though she had recently completed a big tour as an opener for Bjork, she was actually left in serious debt as a result, because as the opening act, she had to pay her own way. Ironically, whereas Lady Gaga makes substantial income from product placements and music sales of “Telephone,” Maluca Mala cannot even afford a telephone. Lady Gaga’s inspiration from Maluca Mala’s cultural expression did not benefit Maluca through increased visibility or opportunities, or greater appreciation of Dominican-American cultural expression. In fact, Lady Gaga credits herself entirely for the idea.¹⁶¹

This is just a single comparison of the disparities in income resulting in part from stolen cultural expression. It is impossible to quantify the hours, years, and decades of communal creative effort that has developed and shaped chola styles and the subcultural capital of mystique that few Chicano cholas and cholas ever are able to cash in on. An exception might include Danny Trejo, who as a former prison inmate, uses his tattoos and *vato* style to play mostly gangster roles in Hollywood films. Yet, even the founders of *Lowrider* magazine, the most successful Chicano magazine in history, had to relinquish ownership of the magazine to a non-Chicano owned corporate owner because of debt problems.¹⁶² Sociological observations that there tends to be an

inverse relationship between subcultural capital (coolness) and economic capital often fail to identify the way that race and white appropriation continue to structure that relationship. Racial appropriation done in the name of (white) female empowerment should continue to be interrogated for its complicity in the maintenance of racial inequality.

Chapter Summary

I have attempted in this chapter to use the specific case of the chola in order to examine the integral role of race, specifically racial inequities and the maintenance of whiteness, in the production of feminist discourses of gender transgression in popular culture. I have organized this discussion into three parts. First, I sought to identify the cholo/a in white female popular culture by fleshing out a portrait of the cholo/a which is often overlooked in academic and dominant discourses. In the second section, I examined the ways the cholo/a provided an integral vehicle for transgressive gender moves in the videos. My motivation was to not only identify why white performers might be repeatedly using the trope of the chola to advance discourses of gender empowerment, but to also give credit to the contributions of generations of street-wise and tough cholas who trail-blazed the path for certain kinds of female public sexuality, occupation of male spaces, and deconstruction of gender binaries by pairing hyperfemininity with toughness or “masculinity without men.” Finally, I make the case that although the chola is called to represent gender transgressions, the way the female performers abstract her style from the context, history, and racialized (both in terms oppressive and defiant) aspects of her subjectivity robs the chola of both her voice, as well as the awards and rewards tied to the circulation of the cultural products of her vibrant resistance. As a result, white femininity is protected and re-affirmed in its special role of racialized patriarchy.

Clearly the chola isn't the only form of cultural and racial appropriation circulating in these performances. Take for instance, Stefani's ongoing use of the Japanese “Harajuku Girls” and Jamaican ska music and Fergie's ongoing relationship with hip hop (especially as one of the Black

Eyed Peas). Lady Gaga also logs countless appropriations from artists of color like Grace Jones and Spike Lee (such as the opening sequence of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* in the "Edge of Glory" video). She also dabbles in "Pan-Asian" symbolisms with her Geisha-like Minnie Mouse ensemble in "Paparazzi" video, or her appearance as a Panda on a Japanese talk-show. Hence, examining their use of, and significantly the temporary "becoming" the chola, was only one way to enter in and examine the way racial appropriation and whiteness are integrally linked to the ways these artists push boundaries around sexuality and gender.

Notes to Chapter 2:

¹ Screenshot. "Pink as Rosie the Riveter." From *Raise Your Glass (music video)*. Directed by Dave Meyers. Performed by P!nk. 2010. Accessed at YouTube/PinkVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjVNIG5cZyQ>. (9/4/2011).

² ———. "Pink as cholo." From *Raise Your Glass (music video)*. Directed by Dave Meyer. Performed by 2010. Accessed at YouTube/PinkVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjVNIG5cZyQ>. (9/4/2011).

³ Max Martin Pink, & Shellback, *Raise Your Glass (song performed by Pink)*, 2010.

⁴ Rebecca L. Clark, "'We live in the suburbs, life is good, so we play ska' : interrogating the reproduction of whiteness and masculinity in alternative rock youth cultures" (1998); Greg Tate, *Everything but the burden : what white people are taking from Black culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003); Gallagher, "Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America."

⁵ By not including their faces, this photo also underscores the relative invisibility of cholos through criminalization or cultural marginalization. Scan of book cover: Reynaldo Berrios, *Cholo style : homies, homegirls & la raza* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Feral House, 2006).

⁶ James Diego Vigil, *Barrio gangs : street life and identity in Southern California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 2.

⁷ Adams Jerome R. Adams, *Greasers and gringos : the historical roots of Anglo-Hispanic prejudice* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006).,Fregoso, Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema: Taking over the Public Sphere," *California History* 74, no. 3 (1995). Perez, "Phoenix Latino groups criticize Lady Gaga for 'racist' lyrics".

⁸ Catherine Sue Ramirez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 61.

⁹ Vigil, *Barrio gangs : street life and identity in Southern California*: 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ Cuellar, cited in: Laura L. Cummings, "Cloth-Wrapped People, Trouble, and Power: Pachuco Culture in the Greater Southwest," *Journal of the Southwest* 45, no. 3 (2003).

¹² Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema: Taking over the Public Sphere," 72.

¹³ Ramirez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 17.

¹⁴ Luis Valdez, *Zoot suit and other plays* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992), 26.

¹⁵ The Homies site describes "Cruzer has the smoothest walk in the Barrio he glides like an old Chevy cruising down the Boulevard...Orrraaleeee!" David Gonzales, "Cruzer,"(1999), <http://www.homies.tv/>.

¹⁶ "Brown Pride," (2011), <http://s709.photobucket.com/albums/ww99/contractkillaz/?action=view¤t=Cain-Velasquez-brown-pride.gif&newest=1>.

¹⁷ Luis J. Rodriguez, *Always running : la vida loca, gang days in L.A* (Willimantic, CT; East Haven, CT: Curbstone Press ; Distributed in the U.S. by InBook, 1993), 113.

- ¹⁸ Ibid., 42.
- ¹⁹ Villanueva qtd in Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 40.
- ²⁰ Mark Taper, "Marco Rodriguez as El Pachuco,"(1979), <http://research.pomona.edu/zootsuit/en/productionsynopsis/characters/>.
- ²¹ J. Starry J. Martinez, *Lean like a Cholo (song performed by Down AKA Kilo)*, 2007.
- ²² American Sabor museum exhibit, Experience Music Project, Seattle: see <http://americansabor.org>.
- ²³ David. Gates, "White male paranoia," *Newsweek* 121, no. 13 (1993); Peter Marin, "The Prejudice Against Men," *Nation* 253, no. 2 (1991).
- ²⁴ H. A. Giroux, "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence," *THIRD TEXT -LONDON-*, no. 53 (2001): 7.
- ²⁵ Carrillo Rowe and Lindsey, "Reckoning Loyalties: White Femininity as 'Crisis'."
- ²⁶ Ibid., 173.
- ²⁷ Carrillo Rowe, "Whose "America"? The Politics of Rhetoric and Space in the Formation of U.S. Nationalism."
- ²⁸ Giroux Giroux, "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence."5
- ²⁹ Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 37.
- ³⁰ Steve Perry, *Zoot Suit Riot (Song performed by Cherry Poppin' Daddies)*, 1997.
- ³¹ (Album Cover) Unattributed, "Cover of Zoot Suit Riot Album by Cherry Poppin' Daddies "(1996), <http://www.amazon.com/Zoot-Suit-Cherry-Poppin-Daddies/dp/B000006C02>.
- ³² Bradley Nowell, *Santeria (song performed by Sublime)*, 1995. Paul Leary & David Kahne (producers).
- ³³ (album cover) Unattributed, "Album Cover, Sublime,"(1996), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_\(album\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(album)).
- ³⁴ Bradley Nowell, *April 29, 1992 (song performed by Sublime)*, 1996. Paul Leary & David Kahne (producers).
- ³⁵ Clark, ""We live in the suburbs, life is good, so we play ska" : interrogating the reproduction of whiteness and masculinity in alternative rock youth cultures."
- ³⁶ Screenshot. "Stefani in cholo style." From *Just a Girl (Music Video)*. Directed by Mark Kohr. Performed by No Doubt. 1996. Accessed at YouTube/NoDoubtVEVO <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHzOOQfhPFg>. (4/20/2011); ———. "Stefani in chola makeup." From *Just a Girl (Music Video)*. Directed by Mark Kohr. Performed by No Doubt. 1996. Accessed at YouTube/NoDoubtVEVO <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHzOOQfhPFg>. (4/20/2011).
- ³⁷ Elizabeth R. Escobedo, "The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles," *Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2007): 133.
- ³⁸ Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 18.
- ³⁹ Unattributed. "Cholas (circa 1990s)." From *Mi Vida Loca film (publicity photo)*. Directed by Allison Anders. Performed by Angel Aviles, Seidy Lopes & Jacob Vargas. 1993. Accessed at http://pinupprose.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/mi_vida_loca_movie.jpg. (4/20/2011).
- ⁴⁰ Joey Ortega, "Sweet Pea,"(2009), <http://www.flickr.com/photos/joebotflick/page7/>.
- ⁴¹ Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 20.
- ⁴² Marie Miranda, *Homegirls in the public sphere* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 40.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 82; For a discussion of the politics of subcultural exaggeration and subversion of respectable styles such as suits or hollywood glamour, see: Dick Hebdige, *Subculture : the meaning of style*, New accents (London: Routledge, 1988).
- ⁴⁴ Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: xii.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.
- ⁴⁶ Habell-Pallan, *Loca motion : the travels of Chicana and Latina popular culture*: 75.
- ⁴⁷ Judith Halberstam, *Female masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 29.
- ⁴⁸ Cummings, "Cloth-Wrapped People, Trouble, and Power: Pachuco Culture in the Greater Southwest," 342.
- ⁴⁹ Ramírez, *The woman in the zoot suit : gender, nationalism, and the cultural politics of memory*: 20.
- ⁵⁰ Lisa A. Lewis, "Being discovered : the emergence of female address on MTV," in *Sound and vision : the music video reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 137.

- ⁵¹ Escobedo, "The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles."
- ⁵² Myra Mendible, *From bananas to buttocks : the Latina body in popular film and culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).
- ⁵³ Arturo Madrid-Barela, "In Search of the Authentic Pachuco: An Interpretive Essay," *Aztlan* 4, no. 1 (1973): 51.
- ⁵⁴ Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema: Taking over the Public Sphere," 318.
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Escobedo, "The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles.," Miranda, *Homegirls in the public sphere*.
- ⁵⁷ Escobedo, "The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles," 142; Rosa Linda Fregoso, *MeXicana encounters : the making of social identities on the borderlands*, American crossroads, 12 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- ⁵⁸ Miranda, *Homegirls in the public sphere*: 45.
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CHAPTER 3: 'I'M LOOKING AT YOU LOOKING AT ME:' WHITENESS AND THE FEMINIST SUBVERSION OF THE GAZE



Figure 3.1 BabyDoll, on stage, waiting to perform for powerful men in order to gain her freedom¹

If you don't dance, you have no purpose. You see your fight for survival starts right now... You are afraid. Don't be. You have all the weapons you need. Now fight.
—Dr. Gorski²

In the 2011 film *Suckerpunch*, the main character Babydoll finds herself committed to an asylum after her mother's death and a series of traumatic events perpetrated by a hateful stepfather so that he can inherit the mother's estate. The stepfather bribes a Latino orderly, Blue Jones, to ensure she is lobotomized by the end of the week. In response, Babydoll embarks on several *Inception*-like levels of fantasy to fight her captivity and escape her tragic fate.

In the primary fantasy sequence, the key vehicle for Babydoll's defense and survival (her "weapons" as alluded to above), is her ability to capture and control the male gaze through hypnotic erotic dance. The male villains become so enraptured by Babydoll's dance that her accomplices are able to steal various items to stage a break-out without the men noticing. Babydoll explains, "whoever has the item we need [for our escape], we get them to watch me dance while we go

around and steal the items... as long as I'm dancing, they won't even be aware."³ In this film, the traditionally theorized site of gender oppression — the sexualized gaze — gets turned against the male spectators, and becomes the women's greatest weapon — a perceived source of agency and the pathway to freedom. Whether or not women are able to deconstruct and subvert the traditional relations of the sexual gaze through sexual performance is perhaps one of the most contested themes in third wave feminism and contemporary popular culture. Many feminist scholars are dubious over third wave claims that the sexually performative woman can use her sexuality as a tool and find elements of empowerment by centering herself as an object of attraction.⁴ Nonetheless, a kind of self-aware “stripper-chic” sexuality is a recurring attribute of the kick-ass sexy women of third wave popular culture, including Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. Moreover, these claims of sexual agency and power permeate the discourses of female empowerment that circulate in these pop culture works. Rather than adjudicate whether “to-be-looked-at-ness” can serve as a sufficiently transformative feminist strategy as a single-axis issue, this chapter works to expand the debate by examining the racial relations embedded both within the sexual gaze and its potential subversion. Specifically, what emerges in the discussion of the literature and the analysis of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga’s music videos is the basic claim of this chapter: if manipulating the sexual gaze *is* empowering at some level for some women, it is an empowerment that relies on racial differentiation and reasserts white supremacy.

This chapter examines the role race – particularly in this chapter, white privilege — plays in the empowering potential of being looked at. For instance, is it accident that the heroine in *Suckerpunch* is blond and white? To get at this intertwined dynamic of race and gender, this chapter briefly explores the third wave premise that the male sexual gaze can be reconfigured as a site of female empowerment. Next, this chapter intervenes in the universal notions of male and female that subtends many of the feminist arguments around the sexual gaze with the arguments of critical race scholars who examine the racially specific trajectories of the construction of femininity

and sexuality. Through that history, and an analysis of the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, I argue that the historically valorized position of white femininity, and the comparative degradation of women of color, plays a fundamental role in the way empowerment through self-objectification operates. By re-affirming and re-asserting white privilege in the name of feminist empowerment, the discourses of gaze empowerment — in these videos and in feminist thought — provide a feminist alibi for the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality.

Gender and the Power of Looking and Being Looked At

Feminist theories addressing the representation of women in popular culture have been heavily influenced by Laura Mulvey's concept of "the gaze." A powerful intervention in film theory when it appeared in the 1970s, Mulvey's central argument is that cinema is set up around scopophilic pleasure for heterosexual men, and that women in cinema are reduced to sexualized objects for male desire. She argues that in film, the subjectivity of women is elided by their "to-be-looked-at-ness," in which woman becomes "the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."⁵ From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mulvey explains how this dynamic presents men as the active heroes (and thus the holders of power) while images of women are limited to projections of male fantasy: "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact."⁶ In this model, women are not only on display for male fantasy, but apart from the role they play in moving forward the male narrative, are irrelevant in and of themselves. To illustrate, Mulvey quotes classic Hollywood director Budd Boetticher saying: "what counts is what the heroine provokes [in the male hero]... in herself the woman has not the slightest importance."⁷ Mulvey's primary concern is with the gaze of the audience (spectator) which, she argues, necessarily sutures the patriarchal relations even more thoroughly because of its voyeuristic nature. The only way to achieve feminist intervention in film,

as conscribed by Mulvey's psychoanalytic perspective, is to disrupt all pleasure derived from the spectatorial gaze, which "*destroys the satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege of the 'invisible guest.'*"⁸

Mulvey's organizing dichotomy between active/male gaze and passive/female object has been the primary basis of organizing, complicating, or critiquing feminist theory around female representation in popular culture. In the 1970s and 80s, the mainstream feminist mission was to follow Mulvey's injunction to "eradicate passively sexualized imagery of the female body," which generally meant rejecting all sexualized images of women.⁹ Between then and now, critical theorists have sought to extend, complicate, or intervene in this theory in a number of interrelated ways.

First, a large body of literature tends to reject or complicate Mulvey's notion that the spectatorial position is *necessarily* male — or that audiences are required to identify with the male perspective. Although they recognize that mainstream Hollywood films may be constructed to privilege the dominant male gaze, some scholars have suggested that audiences can read texts against the grain or resist the intended viewpoint in order to develop oppositional readings of texts. Drawing from Stuart Hall's theory that separates encoding —the authorial intention— from decoding —audience negotiation with the text— critical scholars have argued that marginalized audiences (queer, of color, women, and a mix thereof) can both question, challenge or resist dominant messages as well as "seize" alternative, unintended sources of pleasure from mainstream texts through "seeing other things in the film than the film-maker intended and radically misreading the text."¹⁰ This perspective has identified a number of alternative gazes such as the "female gaze," "queer gaze," "black gaze," or the "oppositional gaze," as well as rejected the (essentialist) psychoanalytic underpinnings of the term "gaze" for more fluid notions of "spectatorship" and "looking relations."¹¹

Second, some feminists have also recently rejected the notion that "to-be-looked-at-ness" is necessarily passive or essentially repressive, as well as reject Mulvey's denial-of-pleasure position.

This is the key intervention third wave feminists and pop culture scholars seek to make in feminist theory and a central focus of this chapter. Rejecting what they see as "anti-objectification militancy," a prevailing attitude in contemporary empowerment discourse is that some young women "*want* to be seen as, and *want* to look at, sex objects."¹² Resisting what she sees as cold, irrelevant, sexless feminism, feminist scholar Jacki Wilson, for example, suggests that new forms of visual sexual expression, such as burlesque, potentially empower women to "bask in the deliciousness of living in both a sexual and sexualized body."¹³ Whether or not this is the case, this belief in the empowering potential of burlesque and visual sexual expression is a key attribute of the performances of Gwen Stefani, Lady Gaga, and Fergie, which I examine in more detail below. That this kind of performance is only available to some women in possession of certain kinds of socially valued bodies and that embrace of these performances re-affirms this hierarchy of female valuation is also a primary argument of this chapter. For this dissertation I primarily look at race as a stratifying element, but there are, of course, other normative exclusions and marginalizations based on size, ability, class, gender identification, and sexual orientation that enables some women to emerge as desirable at the expense of others.¹⁴

This leads to a third key area of critique of Mulvey's position which marks the unlabeled whiteness of the universal "woman" and "man" assumed in the male gaze. Instead, critical race scholars highlight the racial dynamics of who is seen and who has historically been invisible (such as white women versus black women), and who is socially sanctioned to look and who has been forbade (such as white men versus black men). As bell hooks succinctly describes: "feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race... many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about 'women' when in actuality it speaks only about white women."¹⁵ Rejecting the ahistorical psychoanalytic "gaze," Jane Gaines argues we need to examine the social constructed

"looking relations" that have policed and regulated forms of looking across racial lines in addition to gender. Both this chapter and the next will elaborate this position.

Reversing the power relations of the gaze: —"To-be-looked-at-ness" as a site of empowerment

As already noted, one of the most controversial yet quite prevalent goals of contemporary third wave feminism is to resignify the position of being looked at as the object of sexual desire to a position of feminist pleasure and power. Mulvey herself briefly admits that in addition to scopophilia —“in which looking itself is a source of pleasure” — there can also be pleasure “in being looked at.”¹⁶ However, from her Freudian/psychoanalytic perspective, this pleasure is considered passive by Mulvey and therefore, not associated with power. More recently, other feminist scholars have extended the idea that embracing female pleasure, even pleasure derived from exhibitionism, can in itself be politically powerful in the face of repression, elision, and invisibility. Reacting to what they perceive as restrictive notions that women should not be desiring subjects, these theorists suggest instead that we view female "pleasure as political and fantasy as progressive, even transgressive, in its potential to subvert the status quo and to propose other ways of being that fall outside or exceed the boundaries of naturalised ideological positions."¹⁷ Beyond being pleasurable, feminist scholars of performance, dance, and burlesque also theorize the way that even within a restrictive patriarchal system, intentional performance of the erotic for the male gaze creates possibilities for subversion in ways that potentially reverse the script of passive/female and active/male.

The sexual-gaze-as-empowering position (or what I will refer to as “gaze empowerment”) marks itself as postmodern in the sense that it seeks to disrupt binaries and categorizations and seeks ruptures and rifts in the in-between of power hierarchies. It also tends to aim towards subversive rather than radical interventions in gender politics. That is, that rather than reject all sexualized representation of women in effort to end the male gaze, a radical position taken by

Mulveyesque second wave feminists, the pro-gaze camp argues that although the scopic system is indeed predicated on heterosexual male desire, the oppression of the patriarchal sex relations is not necessarily totalizing. Rather, they believe that there are possibilities, ruptures, and crevices made available for carving out new forms of sexual possibility and agency by subverting the current system. In this way, the proponents of this position do believe that some of the master's tools can dismantle the master's house, to rephrase Audrey Lorde's famous adage. At the same time, many of these scholars recognize that seeking empowerment through sexual performance —using the tools at hand — traffics in a potentially dangerous system of contradictions with the potential to go either way; it is a "cultural tactic which can be used to both destabilize male power as well as to reinforce it."¹⁸

Nonetheless, feminist literature focusing on strippers, burlesque, and pop cultural performance argue that women can manipulate the male gaze to achieve power, attain visibility, recuperate female sexual embodiment, and disrupt gender stereotypes and essentialism through artifice, masquerade and performance. Applying these ideas to the erotic performance of striptease, Fortner, a feminist scholar and a stripper, summarizes:

While they operate within a male-dominated environment, strippers actively utilize the structure and power/gender relations therein both to express a multiply-situated self and to profit from it; in this sense, strippers challenge the negative claims against objectification by not only willingly subjecting themselves to it, but also by manipulating their object status towards their own personal goals.¹⁹

In rejection of Mulvey's argument that being gazed upon is necessarily passive, Fortner argues above that women can "actively utilize" the current scopic system to achieve multiple goals by "willingly subjecting" and "manipulating their object status." This active and willing subjugation is described by a Burlesque performer in the 19th century as "awarishness," an awareness and intentionality around their sexual objectification.²⁰ Brian McNair, author of *Striptease Culture*, describes this awarishness as "the self-reflexive postmodern distancing" which, he considers positively, "is a feature of the best porno-chic."²¹ The self-reflexivity that allows these women to

gaze back, to manipulate, parody, or potentially subvert the male sexual gaze purportedly disrupts Mulvey's "invisible guest." For instance, feminist scholar Maura Edmond asks, "how can a 'showgirl', whose primary task is to show and be seen, be subjected to the controlling and scopophilic gaze of a peeping tom?"²² Instead she argues that certain acts such as modeling, fashion, and dancing in music videos is a "fundamentally self-conscious style of performance... premised on an act of display for the benefit of an acknowledged audience."²³ Despite Sut Jhally's uncompromising diagnosis of the objectification of women in music videos in his documentary *Dreamworlds 3*, there is much evidence of the "awarishness," or self-conscious exhibition in the contemporary pop performances of many a singing diva, from the godmother of gaze empowerment, Madonna, to Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and of course, Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga.²⁴

The figure of a woman using her visual erotic appeal in performance to manipulate male desire to her own ends is an ancient story. The bible tells a story of a woman, later identified as Salomé, who dances for a king, and in return, he grants her whatever wish she desires. The bible passage describes: "And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee."²⁵ Thus, through dance and erotic display, Salomé was able to attain from her King whatever she wanted. Contemporary scholars have found in Salomé —re-popularized through Oscar Wilde's play and Richard Strauss' opera of the same name in the late 19th century— a figure that reworks "to-be-looked-at-ness" as a position of power. Instead of being disempowered by objectification, performance scholars argue that "Salomé the character and Salomé the opera turn this now widely accepted theory on its head. Here, to be the object of the gaze is to have ultimate power; it is the position of being looked at that conveys mastery and control."²⁶

Feminist scholars have continued this theorization by examining the economic independence and cultural power burlesque performers achieved in the 19th century through the careful marketing of their sexual power, and as such achieved the remarkable feat of defying the

binary of women's roles of either being "the idealized domestic 'true woman'" or the "vilified prostitute."²⁷ Instead, they argue, burlesque performers and glamorized actresses represented both "self-sufficiency and independence" as well as could move "in society as attractive and desirable beings."²⁸ Another historian of burlesque describes this female erotic performer as a symbol of "confident sexual allure, self-governance and financial independence with a particularly attractive detachment and singularity."²⁹ This quote suggests that the financial independence of the burlesque performer enabled her to escape the oppressions of domesticity to carve out a space of agency at a historical time with few options. In the contemporary moment, the economic power gained through self-objectification is commonly referred to with regards to stripping, neo-burlesque, and popular culture. For instance, McNair highlights that in addition to exploding open the restraints on sexual self-representation for women, the pop musician Madonna was "a successful, controlling woman in what had, until her emergence in the 1980s, been very much the man's world of the pop business."³⁰ Like the burlesque performer of the 19th century, Madonna effectively leveraged her sexual objectification into a very profitable enterprise.

Of the three pop performers that are the focus of this dissertation, Fergie is the most direct in depictions of using her sexuality to gain material advantages. In one of her most controversial songs "My Humps," Fergie describes the way she receives gifts of designer clothing from men who desire her:

*I drive these brothers crazy, I do it on the daily
They treat me really nicely, They buy me all these ICEEs
Dolce & Gabbana, Fendi and Adonna
Karen, they be sharin', All their money got me wearin'*

But she clarifies that these favors are in exchange for looking at her only (i.e. this is not prostitution):

*You can look but you can't touch it
If you touch it Ima start some drama³¹*

By underscoring the message of “look but don’t touch” – a scopophilic relation that applies to strippers and screen actresses as well — Fergie seems to retain a sense of restraint and power over the objectification of her body; she receives favors for looking good, but sexual touch is delivered only on her terms.

In a second Fergie performance, “London Bridge,” there is an elaborate sequence in which Fergie captures the gaze of a young man in the gentlemen’s club. Paralleling the narrative in *Suckerpunch*, where Babydoll holds men captive by locking their gaze on her in order to steal what she needs, Fergie transfixes this man’s gaze while she undresses him. She then appropriates the symbols of his masculinity – the dress shirt and tie – to gain entrance into the inner recesses of the club, which serves as a metaphor for breaking into the ol’ boys club of the music industry. While the interracial relation of this scene will be unpacked in the next chapter (the man entranced by Fergie in this sequence is a young black man), what I want to highlight here is that Fergie explicitly uses the power she has to manipulate the male gaze through her sexual allure in order to attain or achieve her goal of entering a male dominated space. Both of these narratives represent a clear “awarishness,” in that Fergie not only recognizes she is being visually objectified, but looks for ways to use the potentially disempowering gaze to her advantage and profit.

Third wave scholars have also argued that in addition to using their sexuality to game the system, so-to-speak, being looked at erotically carries other gender empowering potentials, from visibility in an otherwise dismissive system, to the recuperation of the often denigrated female body from the Cartesian split and female sexuality from Victorian repression. With regards to the stripper-chic aspects of Riot Grrl culture, Gottlieb and Wald argue that “not only do girls wield their bodies in performance, but they do so in such a way as to make their bodies highly visible. This visibility counteracts (feelings of) erasure and invisibility produced by persistent degradation in a sexist society.”³² Whereas Mulvey’s theorization equates being the subject of the gaze with elision of the female subject, Gottlieb and Wald suggest that eroticized visibility can function in the

completely opposite way. For them, the visibility enabled through erotic display can offer a platform or a stage for coming into being in a system which dismisses or disregards female subjectivity. Lady Gaga confirms this notion that eroticized visibility wields a potential power in an otherwise dismissive music scene. Lady Gaga, considered the queen of spectacle for her over-the-top costumes, told Barbara Walters in an interview that she consciously decided to take her clothes off so that, ironically, she would be *heard*. In order to capture the attention of audiences and get them to hear her music and her message, she had to first attract them through visual sexual appeal. Gaga explains that she was trying to perform new music at a club, and the patrons “were yelling and chatting and drinking and slamming their glasses, And I, I kept [saying], 'Excuse me, hello,' and nobody would stop. So, um, something just came over me and I, I took my clothes off.”³³ Ever since then, Lady Gaga has used the eroticized visual appeal of burlesque and spectacular fashion to assure the attention of her audiences and subsequently this platform gives her voice.

A related idea to Gottlieb and Wald’s comment that “girls wield their bodies in performance” is the argument that stripping and erotic performance is a way to recuperate the body and female sexuality from the Cartesian split between mind and body, as well as from the societal suppression and denial of female sexuality. For instance, Gottlieb and Wald argue that “since such abuses (of girl’s and woman’s bodies) are generally associated with women’s alienation from their bodies, the ability to be embodied - the deployment of the body in performance - provides an antidote to its previous violations.”³⁴ Not only does embodied performance grant the performer access to visibility in public space, the argument goes, it also provides a powerful opportunity for affirmation, recuperation and reclamation of the violated female body. This notion is bolstered by the “look but don’t touch” element of ritualized erotic dance, in that women are erotically embodied, yet also wield control over their bodies and the boundaries of what can and cannot be done to it. For example, stripper/scholar Merri Lisa Johnson talks about the way society has deemed the feminine body as a site of restraint, fragility, and vulnerability. For her, stripping

reversed this social experience: “this sensation of incapability is something I do not feel in the strip club. It is a place where moving like a girl no longer denotes uncertainty, incompleteness, [and] inadequacy.”³⁵

In addition to control and capability, erotic performance in the discourses of gaze empowerment is also a site where female sexuality can be explored and expressed. Whereas Sut Jhally argues that the erotic display of music videos only enables adolescent male sexual fantasy to be expressed, other scholars argue that in a more burlesque-type erotic performance, fully situated awareness challenges “the suppression of female sexuality, the expectation that women are chaste and have no sexual desires.”³⁶ In erotic performance, women break the taboo of being presented as sexual and desiring subjects. Additionally, McNair argues that “porno-chic” (what he calls pornographic tendencies in popular culture beyond actual pornography) can have powerful “transgressive, taboo breaking qualities” especially for women and the queer community whose sexuality has been policed and restricted from the public eye.³⁷ While he acknowledges that society is “still far from the ‘end’ of patriarchy,” he suggests that when “the familiar image of the sexualized female body” is overlaid with “post-feminist irony,” this allows for “unprecedented opportunities for effective intervention and participation in sexual culture.”³⁸

Gwen Stefani’s song “Wind it Up” echoes these logics that locate female embodiment as a source of pleasure and capability, augmented or enabled by the “look but don’t touch” admiring male gaze. In the opening of the song, Stefani describes in detail the ways that boys like to look at girls:

*When the beat comes on, the girls all line up
And the boys all look, but no, they can't touch
But the girls want to know why the boys like us so much*

*They like way we dance, they like the way we work
They like the way the L.A.M.B. is going 'cross my shirt
They like the way my pants, it compliments my shape
They like the way we react everytime we dance³⁹*

In this telling, Stefani describes a captivated male audience in which women control the assets — the adorned and dancing female body — that the men desire. She advises girls that they own “the key” to this situation:

*Uh huh, it's your moment
Uh huh, come on girl, you know you own it
Uh huh, you know your key is still tick-tockin'
Hell yeah, and you know they're watchin'*

For Stefani, the goal of this performance is not only the power and pleasure of being watched on the dance floor which she encapsulates in her line “hell yeah, and you know they’re watchin,’” but she also links it euphemistically to female sexual pleasure through the title and chorus “wind it up:”

*Everytime the bass bangs,
realize it calls your name
Let the beat wind you up,
and don't stop till your time is up*

Stefani’s song describes a desiring economy in which girls derive sexual pleasure from being embodied in dance — as demonstrated by her repeated references to being driven by the beat and bass of the music — as well as from being the object of the male sexual gaze, which seems to increase the pleasure. She re-emphasizes the “look but don’t touch” message of the opening stanza by warning girls about allowing men to control or “steal” the pleasure of the gaze:

*Keep goin' girl, it's your night
Don't let him steal your light*

And emphasizes instead that ultimately *her* pleasure should trump *his* desire:

*I know he thinks you're fine and stuff
But does he know how to wind you up?*

Through celebrating an embodied “looked-at-ness” enabled on the dance floor, Stefani demonstrates this third wave logic that using the gaze and erotic performance mobilizes female pleasure, sexuality, and a sense of power and control.

Brian McNair’s argument that sexual empowerment is made possible through overlaying “post-feminist irony” on stereotypical objectified images brings up a third key argument that third

wave feminist scholars make about the empowering potential of erotic performance. That is, through wink, exaggeration, and irony, erotic performance can undermine the naturalization of gender stereotypes by revealing their performativity. Sut Jhally's analyses of music videos expose the conventions of male erotic fantasy in music video which portray certain stereotypical female roles such as the "inevitable cheerleader," S & M chicks or authority figures like the police, the sexy school girl, etc.⁴⁰ But third wave scholars of erotic performance argue that through awareness, these same roles and stereotypes can be turned on their heads. For instance, Nally argues that in burlesque, performers are able to "take some conventions of femininity, including all those time-honoured ideas of womanhood, such as passivity and naivety, the Madonna and the whore, or the binding of the female form in bullet bras and corsets, and exploit them by over-emphasis, comedy, and parody."⁴¹ From their point of view, items such as the corset, previously a sign of female constraint, can be reworked into a symbol of its subversion. Even in less obviously parodic erotic forms such as stripping, theorists argue that slipping in and out of female stereotypes allows the stripper to undermine the "illusion of reality" and expose "the artifice of sexuality and the construction of beauty (through masquerade)".⁴² Rather than being the central sites that confirm and suture female stereotypical roles, these scholars argue that erotic performance actually offers more freedom than everyday-female-subjectivities because of the movement and change possible through costume changes and ritual clothing removal. For instance, Fortner argues that by cycling through a number of characters, strippers experience a "freedom of role movement" that has the potential to make "norms transparent, fostering awareness and potential transformation of gender/power relations for all involved by enabling more expressive role performances than are permitted in the outside world."⁴³ For Fortner, it is not in the rejection of these roles where she finds the most transformative possibilities, but rather in the moving in between, and having agency around their expression: "by owning our performance of object, we can play with roles; instead of being constrained by scripts, we manipulate them."⁴⁴ Fellow stripper-scholar Johnson concurs: "by

remaining ever in motion, dressing and undressing ... in refusing to be one kind of girl or another, passing instead among borderlands, I hold open the ideological frameworks that define womanhood."⁴⁵ This allows her to play with "various femalenesses, with stereotypes and their undersides" which enables her to become aware of and process "the links and ruptures between me and social constructions of Woman."⁴⁶ Thus, for both of these scholars, the artificial and performative nature of erotic dance in turn enables them to interrogate the performative nature of gender identity generally.

The stereotypical female roles identified by Sut Jhally are all present in Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga videos. But so also are the variety, change, and "freedom of role movement" identified by the third wave gaze-empowerment scholars. For instance, in Fergie's "Fergalicious" video, she alternates between the stereotypical depictions of a naughty girl scout, a present tied up with a bow lying on a pile of presents, a little-girl "Shirley Temple" look, a woman in sexy workout gear, and a stripper bursting out of a cake. Although all of these represent stereotypical displays of female objectification, they underscore the purpose of the song itself, which is all about Fergie and her sexual desirability ("Fergalicious" = Fergie + Delicious).⁴⁷ Brian McNair suggests about Fergie's predecessor Madonna: "whatever she was doing ... she was doing it to herself, and could not plausibly be positioned as a victim."⁴⁸ Similarly, Fergie is almost comedically over-the-top in her self-sexualization, and through the exaggerated and self-referential nature of the song lyrics, we detect a wink and a nod in her repertoire of personas.

Gwen Stefani also cycles through a number of stereotypical female personas. She has alternately become the "inevitable cheerleader," the Hollywood vintage pin-up girl, Rapunzel, the tough girl (aka chola), and so on. Shuggart and Wagoner describe that in the music video "Underneath It All":

Stefani's character is tracked through a gradual shedding of various sexual personas that begin with a caricature of the femme fatale (lots of black, seamed stocking and garter, high heels, jewelry) progress through those of the exotic dancer (feather boas, heart props, strategically torn pantsuit) and hooker (provocatively posed on a street corner in tight

Capri pants, high-heeled pumps, and a filmy lime green top) and conclude with the vulnerable love struck girl wearing very little if any makeup... wearing white.⁴⁹

Like the gaze empowerment scholars above, Shugart and Waggoner argue that it is through the changes or transformations between these characters that the theatricality of these personas is emphasized. Stefani's gender transgressiveness comes when she reveals the constructedness of these gender personas through exaggeration and excess.

Lady Gaga also plays with stereotypical female roles in her videos and is lauded perhaps more than anyone for her theatricality. Maura Edmond argues that the stereotypes in the video "Telephone" — "the beautiful female crime scene corpse, the femme fatale, Wonder Woman, diner waitress, lesbian prisoner and so on" — are so "cartoonishly overblown or perverted variations" that "it seems as if we are being asked to acknowledge each of the 'looks' as self-consciously stylized and playful."⁵⁰ She also acknowledges the "quick-change" aspect of the various looks that highlights the freedom of role movement Fortner suggests about stripping: "with its sixteen diverse costume changes in nine minutes" the video "presents a space for the construction and performance of flexible and multiple gendered identities, which can be easily adopted, readily manipulated, or even magically transformed."⁵¹ Thus, through exaggeration, costume, and rapid change, each of the three performers demonstrates the third wave sensibilities of irony, self-reflexivity, and subversion. What is rarely mentioned in these analyses however, is how many of these gender stereotypes have racial specificity, such as the figures of innocence and purity historically aligned with white femininity, or involve racial masquerade, such as their performance of the chola. Which female bodies are privileged locations for this flexibility in gendered performance is something I address in the next section.

In summary, although not all feminist scholars agree that erotic performance for the male gaze can be sufficiently undermined for fundamental feminist empowerment or true structural change – indeed, even Merri Lisa Johnson admits differentiating between "what a woman's body looks like when reiterating patriarchal scripts and what it looks like when resisting is a complicated

prospect” — what I have attempted to show with this section is that Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are using the grammars of third wave “empowerment gaze” rhetoric in ways that both further their own personal success as performers, and attract young female fans.⁵² As one fan describes, “it’s cool to see the women ... have power and step out of the group and it’s cool how the guys are in the background and letting [Fergie] do her own thing and so that’s what I like about her. She kind of has this [attitude of] ‘I’m hot and I know it.’ And ‘I can do this and you’re just gonna watch me.’”⁵³ For this fan, having power and doing their own thing is directly related to being out front, “hot,” and having others sit back and watch. But who are these white female performers out in front of? Thus far, these theorizations have been narrowly focused on gender as a single-axis identity, suggesting that the relation between the gazed-upon female and the male bearer of the gaze is a universal one. Histories of the colonial gaze, the exoticized woman of color, the lynching of black men for looking at white women, and legal and cultural taboos against miscegenation all indicate strongly that erotic performance and the gendered gaze is anything but racially neutral.

White Femininity and the politics of Race in Gaze Empowerment Discourse

If we take the intervention of critical race theory seriously, every feminist critique must, as Lola Young puts it, take into account “that because of the histories of colonialism and [slavery], gender and sexuality are articulated through a racialized discursive field which renders *any* critical account of gender a racial issue as well.”⁵⁴ Gaze theory, and its subsequent reworking into gaze-as-empowerment, is no exception. Anti-racist and women-of color feminist scholars have been pointing out for decades that the male and female subjects of gaze theory cannot be credibly theorized as universal under the umbrella of an ahistorical essentialist patriarchy vis-à-vis psychoanalytic theory. Rather, they point out that in the context of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism, the subjects and objects of gaze theory must be understood in terms of racial specificity that necessarily shapes the gendered subject and its possibilities.⁵⁵ In particular, as bell hooks, Lola Young and others have pointed out, gaze theory privileges a white female subject. As such, the

empowerment gender discourse of contemporary pop culture which builds off the subversion of gaze theory springs from the specific histories, oppressions, and advantages of a *white* female subject. As has been my thesis throughout, this privileging of the white female subject is not an accidental holdover from less enlightened theories of the past. Rather, whiteness serves as an integral platform for gaze empowerment discourse. Three key racial entanglements inform gaze empowerment discourse and erupt visually in the work of the pop artists under examination. I examine the first two in the remainder of this chapter, and dedicate the next chapter to interrogating the third. First, as I mention above, the concerns and opportunities of gaze empowerment theory are built upon the specific racial histories of white femininity. The cultural valorization of the white woman historically in film, cultural narratives, and in law continues to grant white women a privileged position in the visual economies of contemporary popular culture. Second, the white female subject is privileged visually and narratively not only through the scarcity of black women and other women of color, as may have been the case in early Hollywood. Rather, in contemporary pop culture, white femininity is valorized also through a differentiated presence —i.e., the differentiation between a celebrated white female star and marginal or background women of color as in the chola example illustrated in chapter 2. Historically, many scholars have argued that through colonization and slavery, an exalted white femininity has been developed in relation to a degraded black femininity. This is echoed in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, in that one way the stars “stand out” visually is through differentiating themselves from women of color as a backdrop. Finally, as will be examined in the next chapter, there is a racial dynamic around the male gaze, especially in regards to the white cultural fantasy and hysteria around a black male gaze directed at white women. I argue that this relation too, ultimately bolsters and reinforces the privileged position of white femininity in popular culture.

Reviewing the tenets of gaze empowerment through a racial lens suggests that many of the empowerment opportunities carved out by erotic performance identified by contemporary feminist

scholars rely on a distinctive racial genealogy of white femininity. The primary argument, that women can use their object status to manipulate the male gaze and thus attain certain privileges – such as visibility, affirmation, recuperations and profit — relies on an unspoken racial narrative around the sanctity of white womanhood. The power attained from self-objectification relies on a female subject whose sexuality has been protected, and whose beauty has been exalted such that visual performance results in an economy of desire and fetishization. Within a context of slavery, colonialism, and imperial expansion, the historic development of gender and sexuality in the West links this privileged gender position to white femininity.

Post-colonial and critical race historians such as Ann Stoler and Anne McClintock have traced the ways obsessions and fears around policing racial boundaries, sexuality, and domesticity developed in relation to anxieties around maintaining dominance in the colonies (and slavery and racialized labor in the U.S.).⁵⁶ In such contexts, discourses of eugenics and pure racial bloodlines which maintain capital within white lineages, fantasies (and very real policing structures) around a purportedly inherent black male sexual desire for white women, and elaborate discourses linking white domesticity and motherhood to nation-building all worked to position elite white women in a special position in the national imperial discourse.⁵⁷ While the position of white women in these historical arenas certainly was a subordinate position to white men — their human potential was reduced to narrow gendered arenas of domesticity and reproduction and they were comparatively politically and economically disenfranchised — white women have been compensated, in part, by being granted a special role in (white) civilization. Historically, they were placed above both men and women of color both discursively and through domestic and plantation labor hierarchies. And they have been positioned as the cherished and legitimate wife and mother of the white race and by extension, Western civilization. Rhetorical scholar Raka Shome summarizes:

As symbols of motherhood, as markers of feminine beauty (a marker denied to other women), as translators (and hence preservers) of bloodlines, as signifiers of national domesticity, as sites for the reproduction of heterosexuality, as causes in the name of which narratives of national defense and protection are launched, as symbols of national unity,

and as sites through which “otherness” - racial, sexual, classed, gendered, and nationalized — is negotiated, white femininity constitutes the locus through which borders of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are guarded and secured.⁵⁸

As symbols of not only feminine beauty and motherhood, white women have also become markers of racial purity, nation building, and the site where Otherness is defined and controlled. As such, when contemporary feminist scholars attempt to use, subvert, or play with gender roles and sexuality, they tug on strings interconnected to a whole history of race, class, and imperial power. I argue both in this chapter and the next that this interconnectivity is not only inextricably linked to gaze empowerment discourse, but integral to its very formation.

Locating this racial history in popular culture, film scholar Richard Dyer theorizes the privileged role of the glamorous blond bombshell throughout the history of Hollywood, especially as embodied by Marilyn Monroe. He argues that because of the exalted role of white femininity in which “the white woman is offered as the most highly prized possession of the white man, and the envy of all other races,” “Imperialist and Southern popular culture abounds in imagery playing on this theme, and this has been the major source of all race images in the twentieth century.”⁵⁹ Dyer suggests that themes such as the black rape mythology put forth in the film *Birth of a Nation* – which are unpacked more fully in the next chapter —and the recurrent film and literary invocations of the white goddess underscore the way white women have both been visually fetishized as well as used as a pretense for racial violence. Thus, when one feminist scholar describes the power that the performer feels from “manipulating the audience with her sexual energy” and the effect that she is “made to feel like the most beautiful woman in the world with hundreds of men wanting and desiring her,” her status as the ultimate object of beauty and desire is not only a product of her gender — and a body that conforms to specific sexualized expectations — but also, very much an effect of the racial hierarchies which celebrate, protect, fetishize, and exalt white women.⁶⁰

One way whiteness gets codified visually in popular culture, according to Dyer, is through blond hair. A scholar examining the blond iconicity of Marilyn Monroe and Andy Warhol suggests

that blond hair is a “synecdoche” for whiteness, as evidenced by Marilyn Monroe’s quote “I do not tan because I like to feel blonde all over.”⁶¹ For Dyer, blondness is “the most unambiguously white you can get.”⁶² Further, Dyer suggests that blond hair is associated with wealth (i.e. elevated value) “either in the choice of the term ‘platinum’ or in pin-ups where the hair colour is visually rhymed with a silver or gold dress and jewelry.”⁶³ The blond white woman, conflated with precious metals, is located at the apex of object-value. In the contemporary reversal of gaze theory, if women are encouraged to use the value of their object status to gain leverage in terms of gender inequality, then blond white women have racially specific advantage in terms of having a higher trade-in value, so to speak.

We see the conflation of blond whiteness, value, and the (racialized) male gaze play out vividly in the film *King Kong* where the giant black beast (which many scholars identify as a metaphor for black masculinity) meets his doom in trying to ascend “the pinnacle of the Western world caressingly clutching a white woman.”⁶⁴ The narrative is so culturally archetypal, the film has been remade three times (in 1933, 1978, and 2005).⁶⁵ While there have been some shifts around the explicit imperial narratives throughout the versions, the desirability of the blond Ann Darrow is consistent throughout. Cultural scholar Damon Young directly links gaze empowerment discourse and whiteness in his analysis of the original version of *King Kong*. He argues that Ann achieves a power over Kong — a “power that is associated with feminine to-be-looked-at-ness,” — through her status as the “golden woman” (referring to her whiteness, blondness, and presumably, her value).⁶⁶ In the film, Young continues, the native tribe on Skull Island had been sacrificing native women to King Kong, but none were able to conquer and control Kong in the way that Fay Wray’s blond Ann Darrow did. Upon seeing the golden woman, the native chief offer to trade six of his native women in return. This suggests that Ann’s feminine value is established not just through her gender, but particularly through her whiteness. Young argues, “the premise of the film — that ‘beauty’ has power over the ‘beast’ — is itself premised on the assumption that this ‘beauty’ must

take the visual form of a white woman, while the ‘native’ (i.e. black) women previously offered to Kong have, in their failure to embody ‘beauty’, failed to ‘stay its hand.’”⁶⁷

The relationship between whiteness/blondness and the power invested in to-be-looked-at-ness does not seem to be lost on Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. Interwoven with their appropriations of the chola and other racially marked identities, they all also traffic heavily in icons and imagery of whiteness and blondness from vintage Hollywood figures of Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, Bridget Bardot, to fictional icons such as Rapunzel and Maria from the *Sound of Music* – not to mention the pervasive citations of the 1980s queen of blond ambition, Madonna (who, herself is a composite of white female iconicity).



Figure 3.2: Gwen Stefani in L’Oreal ad.⁶⁸

In a recent television ad for L’Oreal hair dye which aired during the *2012 Golden Globe Awards*, Gwen Stefani is depicted with waves of blond hair, juxtaposed to a gold-colored top and background. The ad announces, “color so superior, it’s legendary.” The surface of the ad suggests that they mean the dye itself is superior to other hair dyes. However, the visual, textual, and contextual links between blondness, whiteness, gold, celebrity, and the legends of Hollywood, both through Gwen Stefani’s persona and the ads placement during the *Golden Globes*, leaves open the possibility that the unnamed superior color is whiteness. While L’Oreal’s superior preference line contains a range of hair colors, blond Stefani is the only depicted model with the phrase linking

color to superiority. For instance, another ad depicts Beyoncé promoting the Féria line (a line of red hair tones), but her accompanying text is “color with confidence.”⁶⁹ The postmodern thrust in gaze empowerment discourse would suggest that because the ad is for hair dye, Stefani is calling attention to the artificiality of blondness, or the performativity of whiteness. This suggests she has “awarishness” around whiteness that may intervene in its naturalization. However, the superior status of blondness (and whiteness) in this ad is not deconstructed even if its performativity is revealed. Rather, the links between blondness, whiteness, gold and platinum, superiority and legend are reinforced, and Stefani uses these quite deftly to her benefit in the gaze economy.

As alluded to in the televised L’Oreal ad as she poses in front of the iconic Hollywood sign, Gwen Stefani often invokes vintage Hollywood as one of her key representational strategies. Not only does Stefani often coif her platinum blond hair and cite vintage glamour through her various styles, but she even portrayed Jean Harlow, a Hollywood icon of the 1930s, in the film *The Aviator*. For Shuggart and Waggoner, part of Stefani’s vintage Hollywood sex appeal entails an extreme emphasis on whiteness: “Stefani tends to be photographed and videotaped (for music videos) in extreme white light, which renders her skin extremely white, her hair extremely platinum...”⁷⁰ This is especially clear in *figure 3.3 (below)* where bright light, coupled with a cream color dress, light colored flowers, platinum blond hair and diamonds all intersect to emphasize Stefani’s whiteness. However, although Shuggart and Waggoner suggest that the power of her erotic and feminine performance comes in the ability rapidly move between different roles, from glamorous to tomboy, or to undermine the naturalization of femininity through irony or parodic excess, they fail to question whether the taken-for-granted whiteness of those roles is also undermined by its performativity. The sheer volume of exalted white personas that these artists utilize suggests that their privileged functionality is not weakened in the performance, but rather, like self-objectification, is utilized as a tool of empowerment. What is clear, is that Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and

Lady Gaga overtly and pervasively use the iconicity of whiteness and blondness in the construction of their empowered personas.



Figure 3.3: Gwen Stefani as Jean Harlow in *the Aviator*⁷¹

Other examples include Stefani as a golden haired Rapunzel in the “Sweet Escape,” where the visual juxtaposition of gold and wealth with an excess of golden locks is repeatedly underscored through what Dyer called a “visual rhyming” of her hair color with the gold trim and furnishings (figure 3.4). Stefani also becomes the sweet white-blond mistress Maria from the *Sound of Music* in the video for “Wind it Up” (a role I unpack further in the final chapter). And, remarkably in the same video, Gwen Stefani directly channels or cites Faye Wray’s Ann Darrow from *King Kong* which as discussed above, serves as a paradigmatic role of the exaltation of white femininity (see figure 3.5).



Figure 3.4 Stefani as Rapunzel in “Sweet Escape”⁷²



Figure 3.5 Stefani channeling Fay Wray from *King Kong* in “Wind It Up.”⁷³

Fergie, who presents as the perhaps the least blond of the three — more honey blond than platinum — still visually highlights the golden-ness of her hair especially in contrast to her dark haired companions. For instance, in the video for “Glamorous,” various scenes are rendered in black

and white, with only certain elements colored in for visual effect. One of those elements — which makes her stand out from a mostly non-white crowd — is an artificially colored yellow hair.



Figure 3.6 Fergie in the video “Glamorous.”⁷⁴

In a later scene, Fergie presents a vintage Hollywood blond glamour interpretation of Bonnie and Clyde.



Figure 3.7 Fergie as “Glamorous” blonde.⁷⁵

Fergie also picks up the stylings of sixties blond bombshell Bridget Bardot in “London Bridge” video, a fifties blond do-wop singer in “Clumsy,” and the curly-top Shirley Temple in “Fergalicious.”⁷⁶ Thus, Fergie uses her whiteness to move in and out of not only racially marked personas such as the chola, but also through privileged and taken-for-granted white racial personas such as the blond Hollywood stars of the past.

Never to be outdone, Lady Gaga joins a long line of pop stars that have intentionally shifted from dark hair to blond as a tool of fame. Lady Gaga claims that she went from brunette to blond when an interviewer mistook her for another dark-haired singer, the late Amy Winehouse.⁷⁷ However, the recurrent citations of whiteness Lady Gaga makes in her music videos and public performances, especially as she emulates the career of Madonna who quite directly institutionalized the power of blondness in her *Blond Ambition* tour, makes Gaga's explanation seem partial at best. As the quintessential "post" performer (postmodern, post-gender, post-race), Lady Gaga videos often function as an echo chamber of citations, where she bounces her blondness off of citations of Andy Warhol and Madonna, who bounce their blondness off of the quintessential blond bombshell, Marilyn Monroe, who, in turn, sometimes Lady Gaga emulates directly.

For example, in the video for "Telephone," Lady Gaga exaggerates the blondness of Marilyn Monroe by emulating the yellow hair of Andy Warhol's famous portrait series of Marilyn Monroe (see figure 3.8). The yellowness of Lady Gaga's Marilyn-inspired hair suggests a self-conscious or even parodic use of whiteness or blondness. However, the Marilyn persona in the "Telephone" video operates semantically to establish Lady Gaga as regal, glamorous, desirable, and powerful. In the video, when Beyoncé comes to bail Lady Gaga out of jail, the jailor tells Gaga, "It's your lucky day, some idiot bailed you out."⁷⁸ Shortly after that comment, Gaga appears as the exaggerated Marilyn, suggesting or validating that she is worthwhile to bail out. Rather than dismantle the visual privilege associated with the legendary color of Marilyn Monroe, the scene that follows emphasizes the powerful position associated with female sexuality and desire tied in with white iconicity. Through references to honey (both a regal metaphor of ancient Egypt and often a stand-in for female queer sexuality) and Beyoncé's forgiveness and implied desire for Gaga, the *Blond Bombshell* is not dismantled in terms of whiteness, but rather put to use in order to combat other disempowering scripts of gender and sexuality.

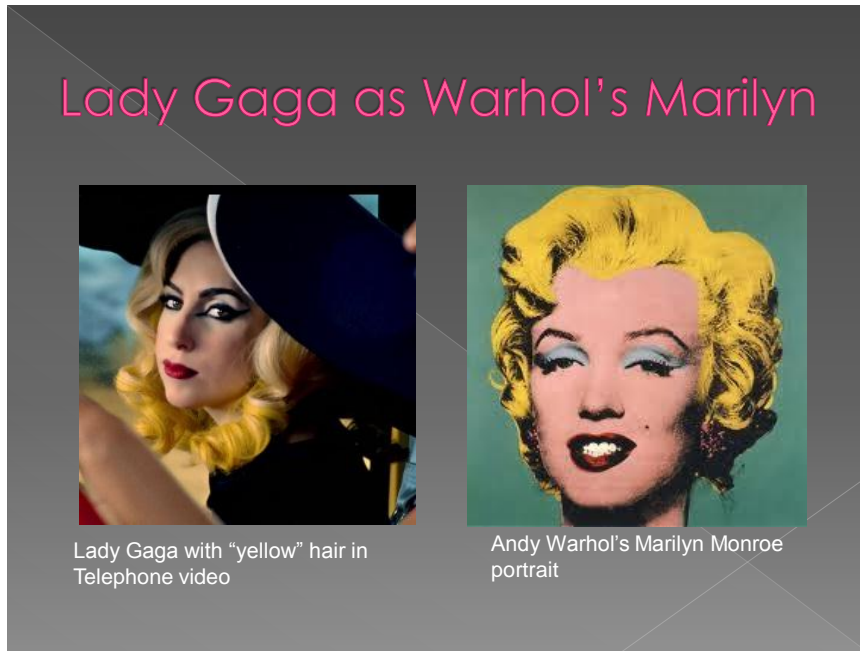


Figure 3.8: Lady Gaga as Marilyn Monroe⁷⁹

In the same video, Lady Gaga cites Madonna during her mid-1980s *True Blue* album era. With seemingly short bleached-blond hair and a black studded-bra, Gaga visually recalls Madonna in her cone bra, corsets and black bra straps that were signature looks for Madonna in the eighties and nineties. In the echo chamber of citations I mentioned above, Madonna's cover art and stylizations for the *True Blue* album were said to be inspired by Andy Warhol's Marilyn series. Through a clever series of interrelated representations, the female subjectivity that Lady Gaga crafts builds off of the privileges associated with blond whiteness and the attendant possibilities for gaze empowerment in terms of gender.



Figure 3.9: Lady Gaga as Madonna in “Telephone”⁸⁰

In addition to citing white/blond icons of popular culture, Lady Gaga videos are infused with other references to whiteness. For instance, in her video for “Paparazzi,” Lady Gaga ties together whiteness and wealth through visual juxtaposition of a vast white estate reminiscent of the white house, close-up shots of white roses, which reflects Dyer’s argument that the white queen or white goddess is a pervasive figure of white femininity in literature and film.⁸¹ More directly, she transposes a pile of money marked with Gaga’s blond-framed face with crystal, diamonds, and other white objects (*see figure 3.10*). Her male lover in this video is played by the Swedish actor Alexander Skaarsgard. As the pale blonde who portrays the Viking vampire in HBOs *True Blood* series, he might possibly be the whitest man in Hollywood.



Figure 3.10 Gaga's house of whiteness in "Paparazzi"⁸²

Again, those familiar with the video might argue that whiteness is shattered in this video because the white boyfriend tries to kill Lady Gaga, and in turn, Gaga subsequently appears in the scenes wearing black and ultimately kills the white male betrayer (which is what sends her to prison in the sequel video, "Telephone"). However, as I have argued above, the symbolic connections between whiteness and wealth/power are left intact. Even as Lady Gaga loses her innocence and appears in black clothing, she retains her status as mistress of the manse, a role emphasized by her command over her black butlers.

What I intend to emphasize through these examples is that whiteness plays a big role in the representational opportunities for white female performers. Thus it is impossible to fully understand the machinations of empowerment through the gaze or erotic performance without taking racial privilege into account. The ability to use their object-status to garner voice, to feel empowered, to manipulate the male gaze and profit, and to potentially deconstruct binaristic notions of gender are all entangled with a specific white trajectory of femininity. This is a racially specific position of gender empowerment that is not available to black women and other women of color to the same effect.

Film scholar Lola Young argues that the “the valorization of the beauty of the female star,” which is an important element in both Mulvey’s gaze theory as well as its contemporary re-working, “is a position that has not been available to women of African Descent to the same extent [as white women].”⁸³ “Historically,” she continues, “black women have not been subject to overvaluation in the same sense that white women have and comparatively few may be described as being part of the ‘cult of the female star.’”⁸⁴ Rather, feminist film scholars who explicitly examine race argue that we need to acknowledge that the construction of black female sexuality has undergone a very different trajectory in relationship to patriarchy, involving a “pattern of patriarchal phases and female sexual adjustments that has no equivalent in the history of white women in the U.S.”⁸⁵ Within the context of slavery and imperialism, the development of black femininity and sexuality has faced profoundly different challenges than white women. For instance, race scholar van Thompson concludes that whereas “white women were considered sacred and protected, [during slavery] African American females were viewed as a thoroughfare, vulnerable to sexual violence from both white males and African American males.”⁸⁶ Further, while historically access to viewing white women’s bodies was policed, black women’s bodies, particularly their genitalia, were subject to intense “scientific” scrutiny under the colonial gaze, with their naked bodies put on display (such as the Hottentot Venus).⁸⁷ Thus, the argument that erotic display is in and of itself liberatory because of the repression of female sexuality fails to recognize that sexual display has functioned quite differently for black women than for white.⁸⁸ Critical cultural theorist Tavia Nyong’o summarizes, “‘becoming-object’ takes on a different aspect when the bodies under consideration are racialized ones, bodies who bear a history of, shall we say, ‘having-already-been-object?’”⁸⁹

To depict white femininity and black femininity merely as parallel genders with different opportunities afforded to them is a dangerous reduction. This parallel construction contributes to the tendency of white feminists to see the exclusion or marginalization of black women as an

unfortunate state of affairs for black women, but not a central concern or element of white feminist theorizing. If gaze empowerment discourse advocates using any of the tools at hand, then why shouldn't white women leverage their special role in history for gender empowerment? As one anonymous reviewer from a feminist journal commented on an article examining leveraging of white privilege in the name of feminism:

Could it be that we underestimate the spread and infestation of patriarchy – that some women's gains may need to be advanced on top of other women's gains in order to approach and gain any access to public dominant male power? Indeed, this is not just or desired but ... to advance some women's interests against men's is more preferable than none at all (particularly because there is the presumption that once this occurs, white women can help to implode the power structure to advance other women's interests).⁹⁰

This commenter's presumption that white women, having used white privilege to achieve feminist goals, will then assist women of color to advance their feminist goals, leaves out the interconnected and dependent relationship of white privilege to the exploitation of people of color. Whiteness, rather than merely an identity category which can be performed or a self-contained set of privileges that can be used for feminism, instead constitutes a *relational* structural position in the racial hierarchy. If, as Raka Shome's rhetorical analysis of white femininity and nationhood suggests, white women serve "as markers of femininity beauty," they also serve as "sites through which 'otherness' — racial, sexual, classed, gendered, and nationalized— is negotiated"⁹¹ In other words, the exaltation of white womanhood is based on the exclusion or degradation of women-of-color subjectivities. Further, this valorized position is not only based on exclusion, but is the very site where those exclusions are negotiated and preserved.

Critical race scholars and feminists across various disciplines have traced the way that the idealization of white femininity and white domesticity was enabled through the explicit exclusion of women of color, and most particularly black women, from the ideal. For instance, historians of reproductive politics document how "cultural authorities elevated white mothers in part by degrading African American mothers... as the sexualized, negligent, superfertile 'counterimage' that the white Victorian mother was defined against and above."⁹² Post-colonial scholars have noted the

way white women advanced their own status in the empire by differentiating themselves from the “primitive” women of the colonies.⁹³ And feminist scholars of labor have documented how the gendered attributes of frailty and passivity were enabled only through the exploitation of women of color as laborers.⁹⁴ The genteel woman of the South enabled by plantation slave labor is a prime example.⁹⁵ What these analyses underscore is not just the unfortunate exclusion of women of color from the idealized notions of white femininity and motherhood, but the semiotic (and material) *dependency* on those exclusions for the consolidation of a valorized white femininity. Eva Cherniavsky suggests that “both the commodified (black) and the naturalized (white) reproductive bodies become ... legible in their *contingency*, as bodies articulated in opposition to each other (mothers are not black; black women are not mothers)”⁹⁶ The questions I pose here then, are: if historically a valorized white femininity depends on the comparative degradation of women of color, does a feminist discourse which seeks to reject the trappings of white femininity such as purity, chastity, and dependency, also then dismantle the differential valuations enabled by racial privilege? Do Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga’s knowing use of whiteness and white femininity automatically undermine the structural privileges of whiteness? Or does their reproduction of whiteness continue to maintain and reiterate these racial inequalities under the alibi of feminist empowerment?

Because gaze empowerment discourse uses the power of desirability in order to leverage the empowerment opportunities discussed above, and that desirability is heightened by a historic emphasis on whiteness, it seems that the politics of racial differentiation is not automatically challenged. At the very least, as I’ve noted, these disparate trajectories of the development of gender and sexuality puts women of color at a disadvantage in this process. But unfortunately, the analysis shows (in this chapter and the next) that instead of dismantling racial hierarchies, they are in fact, reinforced, visually and narratively in the pop culture examples of gaze empowerment, including the music videos of these stars.

Returning briefly to the opening example of the film *Suckerpunch*, further analysis shows that Babydoll's seductive power is predicated on the fact that she is not only desirable, but that she is the *most* desirable, particularly in comparison to other dancers. In the multi-cultural ensemble of five dancers with whom Babydoll attempts the escape, only two remain in the end: Babydoll herself, and Sweetpea, another feminine blonde, who competes with Babydoll for the position as top dancer. The other three were killed or captured by the film's end. These included Amber, the Asian-American girl, the dark-haired Latina ironically-named Blondie, and the improperly heterosexual, short-haired, phallically-named Rocket.⁹⁷ The movie ends with a twist in which Babydoll sacrifices herself so that Sweetpea may escape, saying "this was always your story," and the audience realizes it had been Sweetpea's voice narrating the film from the beginning. In the end, it is unclear whether Babydoll is a figment of Sweetpea's imagination or vice versa, but ultimately, the position of heroine, the female subject capable and worth saving is either the blonde white girl, or the platinum blonde white girl.



Figure 3.11: From *Suckerpunch*: Babydoll in front. Second row: Rocket (left), Blondie (right). Back row: Sweetpea (left), the wise man (center), and Amber (right).⁹⁸

The heroic position of the feminine white woman is underscored through the comparative elevation to the non-ideal subjects of gaze empowerment. Babydoll/Sweetpea's heroism is underscored by the failure and elimination of the not-white or not-straight other women. Ann Stoler points out that "dominant discourses (like those on racial purity and white women)" are constructed not only by the "sanctioned social formulas" they build from, but are also "shaped by rejected ones."⁹⁹ In this case, and in the cases I am about to discuss, the white female subject of gaze empowerment is not a standalone figure or identity. Representationally, the empowerment derived from the exaltation of white femininity relies on the continued contrast and marginalization of women of color.

One technique that appears frequently in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga is the use of women of color as background dancers, who provide a visual backdrop against which the singularity of these white artists emerges. As noted already, both Fergie and Gwen Stefani have entourages of women of color that stay with them across different videos and live performances. Fergie has her "cholas," the same two unidentified Latina women who tour with Fergie and appear in quite a few of her solo videos, and Gwen Stefani has her Harajuku Girls, the same four Japanese and Japanese American women who also appear in quite a few videos, public appearances and have served as back-up dancers on both Stefani's solo tours. Visually, Fergie's cholas and Stefani's Harajuku Girls have been stylized in similar ways to each other so that symmetry is built across the women-of-color back-up dancers. Like the similarity of bridesmaids dresses designed to direct attention to the bride, the sameness of the women of color to each other minimizes their individual value in order to maximize the importance and singularity of the white star. These artists use the symmetry repeatedly in ways that emphasize or highlight their own subjectivity (and, often, their whiteness) and downplay the importance or desirability of the women of color.

For example, in the video for "Glamorous," Fergie's blond hair and lighter skin stands out not only through selective lighting, but also through the differential framing between herself and

her cholas (*figure 3.12*). The profound similarity of the cholas to each other in terms of hair, clothing, make-up, skin tone, and build also plays into the white racist belief that people of color look the same, are indistinguishable, and within a Western ideology that valorizes individuality, are thus marked as less important than the singular, distinguishable Fergie.



Figure 3.12 Fergie framed by her cholas in “Glamorous.”¹⁰⁰

Fergie uses this framing technique prolifically throughout her videos. Not only does she build symmetry into the women of color who are behind her (she does this with men of color as well), but the entire composition of the shot is often built to frame the centrality of Fergie, with her chola body guards serving as one of the fixtures or accessories that achieve this visual goal.



Figure 3.13: Symmetry: Fergie entering the gentleman’s club in “London Bridge”¹⁰¹

Gwen Stefani, in addition to using her Harajuku Girls in concerts and videos, also travels with her back-up dancers to awards shows and premieres. The way they frame her in publicity and red carpet photos suggests that the role they play is an elaborate set of human accessories, designed to make both Stefani and her fashion stand out through framing and contrast. In dramatic contrast, the publicity photo in figure 3.14 shows a very blond with soft locks, pale-skinned Stefani in a feminine blue dress contrasted with darker-skinned Harajuku Girls in masculine grey sweaters and sculpted hair. They are not only the dark to her light, but the hard to her soft, the masculine to her feminine, the monotone to her colorful ensemble. Again, the similarity of the Harajuku Girls to each other especially in terms of skin-tone (either through careful selection of the dancers or make-up or both), reduces the subjectivity of each dancer as only one of four. Since Stefani renamed them each as one element in her clothing label brand name: L.A.M.B. which stands for Love, Angel, Music, Baby, it would be incomplete by design for only one of the Harajuku Girls to appear in public.¹⁰²



Figure 3.14: Gwen Stefani framed by her Harajuku Girls¹⁰³



Figure 3.15 Stefani in front of the American Music Awards.¹⁰⁴

Again, in figure 3.15, Stefani's Harajuku girls are all dressed the same in black sweaters with their brand designations on them (Love, Angel, Music, Baby), white tutu skirts and pink plaid scarfs. In contrast, Stefani stands out in bright yellow which visually rhymes with her yellow blond hair. She also stands above as she is significantly taller than her companions. As human frames, the Harajuku Girls — as a unit — become the perfect fashion accessory for Stefani's runway appearances, ensuring that she is visibly noticeable in the crowd. The power of visibility which is the basis for gaze empowerment is bolstered for Gwen Stefani through the visual contrast with her Harajuku Girls.

Though they fail to fully problematize the racial dynamics of this formula, Shuggart and Waggoner overtly recognize that Stefani's empowerment is all the more highlighted because of the contrast to the degradation of the Harajuku Girls: "the exoticization of the Harajuku girls," they argue, is the backdrop against which "the resistive potential of Stefani's camp sensibility is drawn out and more sharply defined." The Orientalist reduction of the Harajuku Girls into what they call "camp lite" provides the foil against which Stefani's transgression in terms of gender and sexuality "literally emerges."¹⁰⁵ From a gender-only perspective such as Shuggart and Waggoner's, Stefani is merely using all the tools, including her white privilege, to advance her gender empowerment.

For both Gwen Stefani and Fergie, the symmetry and repetition of the women of color in their respective entourages become the grounds for them to emerge. In relation to the apparent interchangeability of the women of color, the white artists emerge as central, singular, and the most valuable figure in the frame. Also, by contrasting with the darkness of hair and skin, their own whiteness and blondness is made even more salient. In short, whiteness is not only highlighted here, but the visual power of the white female body is visually *dependent* on the marginalization of the brown female body.

Lady Gaga also uses visual differentiation through costume, camera angle, and narrative to stand out from a multi-cultural entourage. For example, in the “Bad Romance” video —a video which purportedly challenges sex trafficking — Lady Gaga is narratively highlighted as the lead dancer or most desired of the performers, who, for the most part, appear to be a mixed cast of women of color.¹⁰⁶ In a central sequence of the video, depicted in *figure 3.16*, Lady Gaga stands out as the only one not wearing a mask, and the only one whose face and eyes we can see directly. Though she tends to mix up her background entourage more than the repetitive symmetry of Gwen Stefani and Fergie’s entourages, she still, like the others, uses blond white femininity as her differentiating quality. For instance, though there are lighter skinned dancers right behind her, they have dark hair. While there is another light haired dancer in the far right corner, her hair is short and masculine.



Figure 3.16 Lady Gaga as the “lead dancer” in *Bad Romance*¹⁰⁷

In a similar formula to Babydoll/Sweetpea from *Suckerpunch*, only Lady Gaga has all the elements of white femininity: light skin *and* blond hair *and* soft flowing locks. And only Lady Gaga speaks, looks directly in the camera, and assumes the role of most desired. Lady Gaga’s power of looking, power of speaking, and the power to corral and control the erotic gaze — is even more pronounced through the contrast to the masked/mute women of color behind her.



Figure 3.17 Lady Gaga in “Alejandro”¹⁰⁸

Though the primary focus of this section is comparative relation of white women and women of color, it is worth including a brief nod to Lady Gaga's use of queer, Latino men in the video for "Alejandro." Lady Gaga uses identically dressed, dark haired men to frame her blond hair and light costume.

And as a last example to underscore this point, Lady Gaga uses a more complicated symmetry and contrast in the video for "Born the Way."¹⁰⁹ In "Born this Way," Lady Gaga again attempts to create a post-race, post-gender aesthetic through ensemble scenes with a mix of races and genders in her background dancers. Women with shaved heads dance next to men in skirts. There are dark-skinned and light-skinned dancers of a range of ethnicities.¹¹⁰ All are wearing some version of post-industrial punk/cholo urban look in black, olive or grey. But through lighting —the background dancers are obscured in relative darkness while Lady Gaga is spotlighted — and also through the shimmer of diamonds on her outfit that illuminate in various turns and angles, Lady Gaga emerges.



Figure 3.18: Lady Gaga in front in "Born This Way"¹¹¹

In this dance sequence, Lady Gaga not only emerges as the one in front and center, but against a post-race/post-gender backdrop, she particularizes herself as feminine and white. The diamond-shimmer of her costume recalls Dyer's "visual rhyming" of blondness and wealth or value. Though the visual sameness of her background dancers is potentially transgressive in the ways it collapses race and gender, Lady Gaga makes explicit use of her own whiteness and femininity to stand out from the futuristic sameness. This use of a privileged white femininity shows up most powerfully in a birthing sequence where Lady Gaga becomes the great white mother of the future human race -- something I address more fully in chapter 5. But to emphasize the visual contrast point I am making in this chapter, there is a related scene where there are a mix of bodies in some sort of primordial ooze, but Lady Gaga emerges from the ooze through the visual contrast of light and dark, enabled by selective lighting and her platinum blond hair (figure 3.19). The black women (and possibly a man) merge into the background of an undifferentiated mass that Lady Gaga floats above.



Figure 3.19 Gaga emerges from the primordial ooze in "Born This Way."¹¹²

Chapter Summary

This chapter sought to first detail the discourses of gender empowerment emerging in contemporary feminism which seeks to re-work the patriarchal male gaze into a site of women's power. Rather than accepting the established feminist critique that the male gaze necessarily

reduces women to passive, looked-upon objects, this new feminist stance that I am calling gaze empowerment discourse, sees sexual self-objectification as pleasurable, empowering, and potentially disruptive to restrictive norms of gender and sexuality. Using the postmodern discourses of self-reflexivity as an intervention into the naturalization of gender and sexuality, gaze empowerment discourse identifies “awarishness,” an intentional, self-aware, and often parodic use of female objectification, as what makes the potential difference between empowerment and victimization. To re-iterate Wilson’s explanation of neo-burlesque, some young “women *want* to be looked at,” and they see this ability to control and manipulate the gaze as a pathway to power, self-expression, and an increased multiplicity of gender and sexual possibilities.

It is clear in the music videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga that the self-reflexive ethos of erotic performance and sexual display underwrites many of their claims to visibility, voice and empowerment. This is evident through citations of erotic performance and stereotypical gender display in the form of striptease, burlesque, and sexualized hyper-feminine icons, as well as lyrics advancing the relationship between being seen and increased female desire in the “look but don’t touch” lyrics of these artists and the direct references to be photographed and gazed upon.

But as I attempt to show in the discourse of gaze empowerment, this perspective is targeted towards subversion rather than revolution, and as such, many of these theorists celebrate or at least condone the use of whatever tools are at hand, such as a socially acceptable eroticized body, to advance the aims of female empowerment. Damon Young argues that if within the discourse of gaze empowerment “irony” or aware self-reflexivity “redeems ... sexist representations,” then, by extension, we can expect to find the same logic applied to “racist or homophobic” representations.¹¹³ And indeed, in addition to representations of the eroticized, self-objectified female body, the videos were also saturated with images of whiteness and blondness.

Scholarly champions of the postmodern potentials of irony and exaggeration to disrupt gender and sexuality through performance and parody may feel tempted to suggest that whiteness

too may be denaturalized through performance and parody. If, as Shuggart and Waggoner suggest, the excessive, exaggerated nature of Gwen Stefani's hyper-femininity (particularly as juxtaposed to performances of masculinity) is what designates it as camp, and thus transgressive, then surely the excessive, exaggerated performance of whiteness by these artists, especially in contrast to all the racial masquerade and diversity of cast in the videos, must function to reveal and critique whiteness. The "awarishness" or self-reflexive nature of erotic performance that gaze empowerment theorists point to seems evident in the performances of Fergie, Lady Gaga, and Gwen Stefani as well. However, what I have attempted to argue in this chapter is that whiteness, like sexual desirability, is a tool being used (not deconstructed) to advance the interests of white women. To echo the title of this dissertation, this is an example of the gender alibi at work, where whiteness is bolstered, reproduced and used in the service of "gender empowerment," and thus excused, apologized, or overlooked by feminist theorists.

As discussed in the latter part of this chapter, whiteness is not just an attribute of identity, but rather is a relational positionality. The diagnosis of whether irony undermines the structures of whiteness is perhaps best done by examining the relationship of white women to others historically lower in the racial hierarchy. If whiteness is no longer functioning, then this hierarchy, or symbolic echoes of the hierarchy, should be dismantled as well. However, my analysis in the videos of the ways that these white performers exalt themselves at the expense of men and women of color suggests this is not the case. In this chapter I unpacked how white femininity is established and bolstered in relation to women of color in terms of sexuality and visibility. In the next chapter, I examine the way white women utilize historical relations with men of color to bolster their desirability and social position. And in chapter five, I examine how these white women use the historical relationship between white women and men and women of color through colonial, plantation, motherhood, and labor discourses in order to situate themselves at the top.

- ¹ Screenshot. "Babydoll in the spotlight " From *Sucker Punch*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Performed by Emily Browning (actress). 2011. Accessed at <http://ghostlygames.blogspot.com/2011/04/sucker-punch.html>.
- ² Zack Snyder, "Sucker Punch," (Warner Bros, 2011).
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- ⁴ See, for instance, Rosalind Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising," *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2008).
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- ⁶ Ibid., 62.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 68.
- ⁹ Jacki Willson, *The happy stripper : pleasures and politics of the new burlesque* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris ; In the United States of America and Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.
- ¹⁰ Z. Isiling Nataf, "Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Cinema," in *A queer romance : lesbians, gay men, and popular culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 59; Stuart Hall and University Open, *Representation : cultural representations and signifying practices*, Culture, media, and identities (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).
- ¹¹ Norman K. Denzin, *The cinematic society : the voyeur's gaze* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995); Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, *The Female gaze : women as viewers of popular culture* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989); Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix, "Black Looks," in *The Female gaze : women as viewers of popular culture*, ed. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989); hooks, *Black looks : race and representation*; Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, *A queer romance : lesbians, gay men, and popular culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995); Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing the Queer Viewing," in *A queer romance : lesbians, gay men, and popular culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London; New York: Routledge, 1995); Nataf, "Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Cinema."; Anna Everett, *Returning the gaze : a genealogy of Black film criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Jane Gaines, "White privilege and looking relations : race and gender in feminist film theory " in *Film and theory : an anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).
- ¹² Willson, *The happy stripper : pleasures and politics of the new burlesque*: 3.
- ¹³ Ibid., 17-18.
- ¹⁴ Kim Q. Hall, "Reimagining disability and gender through feminist disability studies: an introduction," in *Feminist disability studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). April Herndon, "Disparate but disabled: fat embodiment and disability studies," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Alison Eves, "Queer Theory, Butch/Femme Identities and Lesbian Space," *Sexualities* 7, no. 4 (2004); Halberstam, *Female masculinity*.
- ¹⁵ hooks, *Black looks : race and representation*: 123.
- ¹⁶ Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 58.
- ¹⁷ Nataf, "Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Cinema," 57.
- ¹⁸ W. Chapkis, *Live sex acts : women performing erotic labor* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.
- ¹⁹ Meredith Holland Fortner, "Stripping subjectivity : dynamic multiplicity, "covert mimesis," and reinscription/resistance through subversion" (2010), 9.
- ²⁰ Maria-Elena Buszek, "Representing "Awarishness": Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19th-Century Pin-Up," *TDR* 43, no. 4 (1999).
- ²¹ Brian McNair, *Striptease culture : sex, media and the democratization of desire* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 70.
- ²² Maura Edmond, "Fashionable Attractions: Fashion Parades in Popular Entertainment from Lady Duff-Gordon to Lady Gaga," *Scan: Media Arts Culture* 7, no. 2 (2010).
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Sut Jhally and Foundation Media Education (Dir). *Dreamworlds 3 desire, sex & power in music video*. Performed by Media Education Foundation, 2007.

- ²⁵ *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New testaments translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his majesty's special command*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), MARK 6: 22.
- ²⁶ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "'Here's Lookin' at You, Kid': The Empowering Gaze in Salomé," *Profession Profession* (1998); See Also: Brenda Cossman, "Turning the Gaze Back on Itself: Comparative Law, Feminist Legal Studies, and the Postcolonial Project," *Utah Law Review Society*, no. 525 (1997).
- ²⁷ Buszek, "Representing 'Awarishness': Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19th-Century Pin-Up."
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ²⁹ Wilson, 103
- ³⁰ McNair, *Striptease culture : sex, media and the democratization of desire*: 67 ; Barry M. Dank, *Sex work & sex workers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999).
- ³¹ will.i.am and David Payton, *My Humps (song performed by Black Eyed Peas)*, 2005. A&M Record.
- ³² Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, "Smells like teen spirit : riot grrrls, revolution and women in independent rock " in *Microphone fiends : youth music & youth culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 269.
- ³³ Lady Gaga, "Interview with Barbara Walters," in *Barbara Walters Presents: The 10 Most Fascinating People of 2009* (USA: ABC December 9, 2009).
- ³⁴ Gottlieb and Wald, "Smells like teen spirit : riot grrrls, revolution and women in independent rock " 269.
- ³⁵ Merri Lisa Johnson, "Pole Work: Autoethnography of a Strip Club," in *Sex work & sex workers*, ed. Barry M. Dank (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 150.
- ³⁶ Claire Nally, "Grrrlly hurly burly: neo-burlesque and the performance of gender," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 4 (2009): 623.
- ³⁷ McNair, *Striptease culture : sex, media and the democratization of desire*: 62.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117, 206-7.
- ³⁹ Gwen Stefani et al., *Wind it Up (Song Performed by Gwen Stefani)*, 2006. Interscope Records.
- ⁴⁰ Jhally and Media Education (Dir). *Dreamworlds 3 desire, sex & power in music video*.
- ⁴¹ Nally, "Grrrlly hurly burly: neo-burlesque and the performance of gender," 628.
- ⁴² Johnson, "Pole Work: Autoethnography of a Strip Club," 154.
- ⁴³ Fortner, "Stripping subjectivity : dynamic multiplicity, "covert mimesis," and reinscription/resistance through subversion," 26.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Johnson, "Pole Work: Autoethnography of a Strip Club," 149.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ⁴⁷ Fatima Robinson (Dir). *Fergalicious*. Performed by Fergie, 2006. Music Video.
- ⁴⁸ McNair, *Striptease culture : sex, media and the democratization of desire*: 67.
- ⁴⁹ Shugart and Waggoner, *Making camp : rhetorics of transgression in U.S. popular culture*: 126.
- ⁵⁰ Edmond, "Fashionable Attractions: Fashion Parades in Popular Entertainment from Lady Duff-Gordon to Lady Gaga."
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Johnson, "Pole Work: Autoethnography of a Strip Club," 154.
- ⁵³ From anonymous personal interview, collected as part of coursework for field methods course. Winter, 2008.
- ⁵⁴ Lola Young, *Fear of the dark : 'race', gender, and sexuality in the cinema* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 33., emphasis added
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid*; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks : Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press,, 1992); Gaines, "White privilege and looking relations : race and gender in feminist film theory " .
- ⁵⁶ Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power : race and the intimate in colonial rule*; McClintock, *Imperial leather : race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*.
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- ⁵⁸ Shome, "White Femininity and the Discourse of the Nation: Re/Membering Princess Diana," 323.
- ⁵⁹ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly bodies : film stars and society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 40.
- ⁶⁰ Willson, *The happy stripper : pleasures and politics of the new burlesque*: 138. Even in the world of stripping there are many more opportunities for white women. Women of color, when they are present, are usually relegated to exotic roles on the margins of a majority white cast. See: Kim Price-Glynn, *Strip club : gender, power, and sex work* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank, and Merri Lisa Johnson, *Flesh for fantasy : producing and consuming exotic dance* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2006).
- ⁶¹ Ruth Adams, "Idol Curiosity: Andy Warhol and the Art of Secular Iconography," *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (2004): 91.
- ⁶² Dyer, *Heavenly bodies : film stars and society*: 40.
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- ⁶⁴ Ibid; Ed Guerrero, "The Black man on our screens and the empty space in representation," in *Black male : representations of masculinity in contemporary American art*, ed. Thelma Golden and Art Whitney Museum of American (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art : Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994).
- ⁶⁵ It also appears in numerous cultural citations, including videos and photos by Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga, mentioned in this and the next chapter. See also: Rogers Cadenhead, "Annie Leibovitz Monkeys Around with LeBron James," *WatchingtheWatchers.org*(2008), <http://watchingthewatchers.org/news/1378/annie-leibovitz-monkeys-around-lebron>.
- ⁶⁶ Damon Young, "Ironic Identities and Earnest Desires: King Kong and the Desire to-be-looked-at," in *Thinking Gender - The NEXT Generation: UK Postgraduate Conference in Gender Studies* (University of Leeds, UK: Feminist Review/Trust, 2006).
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.
- ⁶⁸ L'Oreal Paris, "Gwen Stefani Superior Preference," http://www.lorealparisusa.com/_us/_en/default.aspx#/?page=top{userdata//d+d//diagnostic|main:brandpage:superiorpreference|media:_blank|nav|overlay:_blank}.
- ⁶⁹ ———, "Beyonce Color with Confidence," http://www.lorealparisusa.com/_us/_en/default.aspx#/?page=top{userdata//d+d//diagnostic|main:supercategory:haircolor|media:_blank|nav|overlay:_blank}.
- ⁷⁰ Shugart and Waggoner, *Making camp : rhetorics of transgression in U.S. popular culture*: 121.
- ⁷¹ Miramax Publicity Photo, "Gwen Stefani in the Aviator,"(2004), <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1916770304/tt0338751>.
- ⁷² Screenshot. "Gwen Stefani as Rapunzel " From *Sweet Escape (Music Video)*. Directed by Joseph Kahn. Performed by Gwen Stefani. 2007. Accessed at YouTube/GwenStefaniVEVO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0lf_fE3HwA. (4/20/2011).
- ⁷³ ———. "Gwen Stefani waiting for Kong?" From *Wind It Up*. Directed by Sophie Mueller. Performed by Gwen Stefani. 2007. Accessed at iTunes download. ; Steve Hill Screenshot. "Fay Wray in King Kong (flowing gown)." From *King Kong*. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. Performed by Fay Wray. 1933. Accessed at The Fay Wray Pages: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfo82.jpg>. (1/21/2012); ———. "Fay Wray In King Kong - Hands tied up." From *King Kong*. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. Performed by Fay Wray. 1933. Accessed at The Fay Wray Pages: <http://www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfp33.jpg>. (1/21/2012).
- ⁷⁴ Screenshot. "Fergie with highlights." From *Glamorous ft. Ludacris (Music Video)*. Directed by Dave Meyers. Performed by Fergie. 2007. Accessed at YouTube/FergieVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0SyUgw98tE>. (1/21/2012).
- ⁷⁵ ———. "Fergie as Bonnie." From *Glamorous ft. Ludacris (Music Video)*. Directed by Dave Meyers. Performed by Fergie. 2007. Accessed at YouTube/FergieVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0SyUgw98tE>. (1/21/2012).
- ⁷⁶ Webb (Dir). *London Bridge*; Marc Webb and Rich Lee (Dir). *Clumsy*. Performed by Fergie, 2007. Music Video; Robinson (Dir). *Fergalicious*.
- ⁷⁷ Elizabeth Goodman, *Lady Gaga : critical mass fashion* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010), 67.
- ⁷⁸ Akerlund (Dir). *Telephone*.

- ⁷⁹ Screenshot. "Lady Gaga as Warhol's Marilyn." From *Telephone (Music Video)*. Directed by Jonas Akerlund. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2010. Accessed at Youtube/Vevo Lady Gaga site. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBsypHzF3U>. (4/20/2011); Andy Warhol, *Shot Blue Marilyn*, 1962.
- ⁸⁰ Screenshot. "Lady Gaga as Madonna." From *Telephone (Music Video)*. Directed by Jonas Akerlund. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2010. Accessed at Youtube/Vevo Lady Gaga site. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBsypHzF3U>. (4/20/2011); ——. "Madonna in Open Your Heart." From *Open Your Heart (Music Video)*. Directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino. Performed by Madonna. 1986. Accessed at YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnY-V5jVqEM>. (1/21/2012); Warner Bros. Publicity Photo, "Madonna for True Blue Album,"(1985), <http://madonnascrapbook.blogspot.com/2010/08/so-if-you-should-ever-doubt.html>.
- ⁸¹ Akerlund (Dir). *Paparazzi*.
- ⁸² Screenshot. "Whiteness in Lady Gaga's Paparazzi Video." From *Paparazzi (Music Video)*. Directed by Jonas Akerlund. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2009. Accessed at LadyGagaVEVO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2smz_1L2_0. (1/21/2012).
- ⁸³ Young, *Fear of the dark : 'race', gender, and sexuality in the cinema*: 16.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Gaines, "White privilege and looking relations : race and gender in feminist film theory " 22.
- ⁸⁶ Carlyle Van Thompson, *Eating the Black body : miscegenation as sexual consumption in African American literature and culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 16.
- ⁸⁷ Evelyn M. Hammonds, " Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist theory and the body : a reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999); Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and pathology : stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- ⁸⁸ Latina women, Asian women, Native American women also have divergent trajectories of femininity and sexuality. Lola Young notes that "although all designated Other" each group "have their own representational specificity" (17). For instance, in chapter two, I discussed how the Latina in film represented the sexy hot spitfire but could only serve as the temporary or expendable love interest in relation to the white starlet.
- ⁸⁹ Nyong'o and Halberstam, "Iphone, U-Phone...Or Is Gaga the new Dada?...Or Roll Over Andy Warhol...".
- ⁹⁰ This is cited from an anonymous review received in response to my submission to Women Studies in Communication, in 2009. For academic precedence in citing anonymous reviews to expose discourses that tend to circulate in public culture in coded or veiled ways, see Carole Blair, Julie Brown, and Leslie Baxter, "Disciplining the feminine," *Quart. J. of Speech Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 4 (1994).
- ⁹¹ Shome, "White Femininity and the Discourse of the Nation: Re/Membering Princess Diana," 323.
- ⁹² Solinger, *Pregnancy and power : a short history of reproductive politics in America*: 22.
- ⁹³ Burton, *Burdens of history : British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture, 1865-1915*.
- ⁹⁴ Glenn, "From servitude to service work: historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor."
- ⁹⁵ Fox-Genovese, *Within the plantation household : Black and White women of the Old South*; Glenn, "From servitude to service work: historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor."
- ⁹⁶ Cherniavsky, *That pale mother rising : sentimental discourses and the imitation of motherhood in 19th-century America*: xi.
- ⁹⁷ I am describing them here based on the types they filled in the film. Amber was played by Jamie Chung, a Korean-American Actress, while Blondie was played by Vanessa Hutchens, who is actually mixed race with a Filipina mother of mixed Spanish, Chinese and Filipina ancestry. However, she is often cast to play Latina roles, such as her most famous role as Gabriela Montez in the High School Musical series.
- ⁹⁸ Clay Enos, *Group Photo from the film Sucker Punch*, 2011. Warner Bros.
- ⁹⁹ Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power : race and the intimate in colonial rule*: 212.
- ¹⁰⁰ Screenshot. "Fergie framed by her cholas (Photo)." From *Glamorous (Music Video)*. Directed by Dave Meyers. Performed by Fergie ft. Ludacris. 2007. Accessed at YouTube/FergieVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0SyUgw98tE&ob=av2e>. (2/24/2012).
- ¹⁰¹ ——. "Fergie centered in the frame (Photo)." From *London Bridge (Music Video)*. Directed by Marc Webb. Performed by Fergie. 2006. Accessed at YouTube: <http://youtu.be/Ubk0cZqJdu8>. (2/24/2012).

¹⁰² It took some years for the actual names of Stefani's back-up dancers to be accessible. They are Maya Chino (Love), Jennifer Kita (Angel), Rino Nakasone Razalan (Music), and Mayuko Kitayama (Baby)

¹⁰³ Interscope Publicity Photo, "Gwen Stefani Out Front of Harajuku Girls "(2007), <http://harajukudiaries.buzznet.com/user/ppphotos/?id=287149>.

¹⁰⁴ SGranitz/WireImage, *Gwen Stefani at American Music Awards*, 2004. Life Magazine.

¹⁰⁵ Shugart and Waggoner, *Making camp : rhetorics of transgression in U.S. popular culture*: 135-6.

¹⁰⁶ Lawrence (Dir). *Bad Romance*.

¹⁰⁷ Screenshot. "Lady Gaga as the lead dancer." From *Bad Romance (Music Video)*. Directed by Francis Lawrence. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2009. Accessed at YouTube/LadyGagaVEVO: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I. (1/21/2012).

¹⁰⁸ ——. "Lady Gaga with her boys." From *Alejandro*. Directed by Steven Klein. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2010. Accessed at Youtube/LadyGagaVEVO www.youtube.com/watch?v=niqrrmev4mA. (4/20/2011).

¹⁰⁹ Nick Knight (Dir). *Born This Way*. Performed by Lady Gaga, 2011. Music Video.

¹¹⁰ Of the background dancers I could identify, she is backed by Mark Kanemura, (mixed raced Japanese, Samoan and European), Victor Rojas (Peruvian), Richard Jackson (African American), and Mike Munich (white). There is no identifying information available for the female background dancers in this video on any site I could find.

¹¹¹ Screenshot. "Lady Gaga as the Blond Difference." From *Born This Way (Music Video)*. Directed by Nick Knight. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2011. Accessed at YouTube/LadyGagaVEVO: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw. (1/21/2012).

¹¹² ——. "Lady Gaga emerges from primordial ooze." From *Born This Way (Music Video)*. Directed by Nick Knight. Performed by Lady Gaga. 2011. Accessed at YouTube/LadyGagaVEVO: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw. (1/21/2012).

¹¹³ Young, "Ironic Identities and Earnest Desires: King Kong and the Desire to-be-looked-at," 4.

CHAPTER 4: DANGEROUS MISCEGENIES: FEMINIST PLEASURE, RACIAL DANGER, AND CONTAINMENT IN THE TROPE OF BLACK MEN DESIRING WHITE WOMEN



Figure 4.1 Ludacris assures Fergie that she deserves all the finer things in life¹

In the 2007 video “Glamorous,” rapper Ludacris appears alongside Fergie in a vintage Hollywood-style homage to 1930s outlaws Bonnie and Clyde.² Ludacris raps to Fergie: *“I’m talking Champagne wishes, caviar dreams/ you deserve nothing but all the finer things.”*³ Fergie smiles and seems to blossom under his attention as Ludacris tells Fergie that she deserves to be worshipped. In this dynamic, Ludacris provides the male diegetic gaze that validates Fergie’s desirability. Fergie’s blond Hollywood glamour signaling her to-be-looked-at-ness is reinforced by the black rapper’s attention. As part of a racial primitivism that continues to circulate, the black rapper embodied in Ludacris not only represents male desire, but occupies a racialized space of sexuality and masculinity whose attention towards this white woman re-affirms her position at the racial pinnacle of desirability.

By using the metaphor of Bonnie and Clyde, the viewer is alerted that there is something dangerous or illicit in this coupling. Besides being notorious bank robbers, Bonnie and Clyde were considered sexually scandalous in the 1930s because they traveled together unmarried. This video

updates these connotations of illicit love and danger through the spectacle of interracial desire, as Ludacris admits to Fergie: “*now this whole world has no clue what to do with us/[but] I've got enough money in the bank for the two of us.*”⁴ Visually framed as a dangerous and doomed love affair, Ludacris underscores lyrically that their coupling is not intelligible in mainstream culture. He tries to mitigate its seeming impossibility by suggesting he has enough wealth to buy the cultural sanction. But by framing him as a Clyde-like character — surrounded by police — there is an implication that Ludacris has come by his money illegitimately. At the same time, Fergie reaps the semiotic benefits of being uplifted as the ultimate object of desire, and titillated by the dangerous implications of interracial desire.



Figure 4.2 Cornered by the police, the coupling of Fergie and Ludacris is doomed⁵

Thus, the danger and titillation of interracial desire is simultaneously invoked and contained in this video, since the Bonnie and Clyde narrative forecloses any future as a couple. Surrounded by the police, on the edge of a cliff, the video assures the spectator that the tragic ending is imminent. Further, in an extra-prophylactic move, the “Glamorous” video adds a meta-shot, where the audience sees a director and cameras, reminding us that “Bonnie” and “Clyde” were just acting all along.



Figure 4.3 Just Acting! Fergie shows that her love affair with Ludacris is not real in “Glamorous”⁶

This strategy of revealing the behind-the-scenes production of the music video, specifically in regards to an interracial love affair, mimics Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” video in which Madonna and her black lover take a bow at the end to let everyone know that this highly controversial affair was only performance.⁷ Similarly, Fergie’s “Glamorous” also assures the spectator that Ludacris and Fergie are not *really* a couple – no racial-sexual lines are actually crossed. They are only putting on a show to emphasize Fergie’s glamorousness.

The example above is but one of many sequences where interracial depictions of sexual allure, danger, and containment are repeated in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. In many of these videos, black men and other men of color are framed as the primary desiring agents of the white female star which, in the historical context of taboo and socially policed black male-white female desire, provides a supercharged, dangerous sexual tension to highlight white female desirability. Within the narrative of gaze-empowerment, where desirability becomes a primary site for female empowerment, this interracial diegetic gaze becomes central to the narratives of female empowerment. However, if, as many race scholars contend, white female empowerment has been dependent in part on maintaining their privileged relative position to white men in the racial hierarchy, then interracial coupling has the potential to destabilize white

privilege. Thus, predictably, the flirtation with the racial *Other* in these music videos does not cross certain racial boundaries. The co-presence of male desire and containment, in turn, provides a feminist narrative of a female triumph over the male gaze. Ultimately, in these scenarios, female empowerment via manipulation of the male gaze is not only inextricably tied up with racial inequality, but in many cases is semiotically dependent on it.

Close analysis of the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga reveals a complex of intertwined issues and tensions of race and gender operating around the black male gaze. The first part of this chapter examines the way the racial history of black masculinity provides the popular feminist imagination with a male figure that serves as what Watts and Orbe describe as “lightning in a bottle” or “a brilliant danger.”⁸ The previous two chapters of this dissertation highlight the third wave feminist tension between women displaying themselves sexually to garner privileges associated with manipulating the male gaze, and navigating the dangers associated with that public sexuality, both physical and social. I contend in this chapter that the racist historical narratives which fabricate black men as dangerously masculine, insatiably hypersexual, and sexually taboo for white women provide fraught symbolic landscapes for feminist psychodramas around sexual desire and danger.

In the videos I analyze, the desiring black male provides three important vehicles for feminist empowerment discourses to emerge in a complex dialectic of desire-danger-containment. First, because of the fantasmic primitivist discourses that have dubbed black men as hyper-sexual, or closer to nature, the desiring black man provides the white female object of his gaze with a heightened allure of desirability – an important element in the gaze empowerment strategy. Second, the myth of the black rapist and other narratives around unbridled black masculinity brings the feminist concerns of sexual danger to the fore. The unspoken aura of danger which accompanies the black gaze provides for an externalized representation of the female fear of rape and loss of sexual autonomy — a fear which itself has come to serve as a metonym for female

oppression generally.⁹ But of course it is the triumph over sexual danger which provides the affective appeal for a feminist empowerment narrative. This is aided by the third aspect of dangerous black masculinity. Because of the violent history of lynching and the draconian policing of black sexual advances towards white women – both real and imagined – the sexual threat posed by black masculinity has been foreclosed in history. In fact, this historical dynamic is one that gave white women the power of accusation and in essence the power of life and death over black men. The sexually taboo relationship between black men and white women is one of the few arenas in history where women are granted explicit power over men. Specifically, white supremacy and the virulent defense of racial caste interests provided white women power over black men – provided that white women supported and upheld the strict racial boundaries. Drawing on these racial histories that continue to circulate in the racial unconscious, analysis of the videos of Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga reveal they use the imagery of desiring black men in a repetitive cycle of desire and foreclosure. The “dangerous miscegeny” posed by desiring black men provides fodder for feminist empowerment narratives through reinforcing the desirability of white women, while at the same time enabling narratives of triumph over sexual danger.

But using the privileged position of white women in the racial-sexual hierarchy for feminist ends comes with a tradeoff: the preservation of the racial-sexual hierarchy which maintains white women in a subordinate position to white men at the same time it grants privileges over others. Because of that privileged racial position, these white female artists seem to be invested in containing the challenges to the racial-sexual hierarchy such as the destabilization of racial boundaries that miscegenation threatens.¹⁰ As discussed in the second part of this chapter, the videos are replete with strategies of containment which protect against the “consummation” of racial crossover and re-affirm the white patriarchal family unit. In other words, the consolation prize of racial privilege may seduce white women into maintaining racial-sexual hierarchy, at the expense of fundamental challenges to gendered oppression.

Historical context of the racial taboo

The power of this interracial sexual dynamic hinges upon racist controlling images positing black men as sexually lascivious “beasts.”¹¹ The general dehumanizing depiction of colonized and enslaved people as primitive, animal-like, or as representing an earlier stage of human evolution (atavism) has served as an alibi for colonization and enslavement for centuries. However, at key moments in history, white obsessions around black hypermasculinity have been crystalized into a perceived threat against white women – particularly at times when black and other colonized people have made claims for greater rights and social equality. The myth of the black rapist, as Angela Davis describes it, or “Black Peril” as post-colonial scholar Ann Stoler identifies, directly refers to the fantasmic and strategic narrative that black men are insatiably sexually attracted to — and thus are imminently dangerous to— white women.¹² This perceived threat is the premise of the film D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which conflates early African American political aspirations with a sinister plot to marry and mate white women, and thus glorifies the rise of the KKK as a protection for white women from such attacks, as white female consent to such an arrangement was unthinkable.¹³ This narrative not only played out in film representations, but also provided a cover story for a violent history of lynching and white racial terrorism against newly enfranchised black communities in the postbellum South. Anti-lynching activists such as Ida Wells-Barnett have exposed this narrative of black-on-white rape as an invented pretense to cover the violent political and social suppression of black aspirations. She points out that despite claims that lynching protected white women, it was most often used to target financial or politically successful black citizens “when their political prominence made them obnoxious to their political opponents” or if he “showed a spirit of courageous manhood.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the narrative of black peril dominated the public discourse as a primary structuring discourse. For instance, one highly publicized example of lynching is that of Emmett Till, a black teenage boy who was brutally beaten, tortured and murdered for purportedly “wolf-whistling” at a white woman, and carrying a photo of

a white woman in his wallet.¹⁵ His murderers admitted to the killing Till in an interview with *Look* magazine – after they were acquitted of charges – and attempted to justify it on the grounds that cross-racial desire on Till's part had the potential to destabilize the tenuous equation between “white family, white property, and white culture.”¹⁶ They argued that they needed to kill Till to keep black men “on notice” and “in their place.”¹⁷ Thus, the hypersexualization of black men, and the resultant perceived threat to white women became a central cultural formation around which anxieties over challenges to the white supremacist racial order were played out.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the controlling image of the looming black rapist also put a damper on female public mobility and early feminist aspirations of white women through its emphasis on sexual danger and the need for protection from white men. In exchange for adhering to traditional gender boundaries and upholding strict racial lines, white women were granted a kind of consolation prize based on racial privilege – an exalted position of sanctified femininity and the power of accusation against black men. Although the benefits of whiteness were spread unevenly across class lines in practice, as historian Lisa Lindquist Dorr attests, in theory, white women of all types were afforded a certain “rhetorical position” which “gave white women considerable ability to accuse black men of rape and demand that white men provide protection through revenge.”¹⁸ For instance, in the Scottsboro trial in the 1930s, two unemployed white women traveling unattended by train were able to avoid arrest for vagrancy by accusing black men also traveling on the train of rape. As one historian describes, “after a lifetime of being regarded as ‘white trash,’ [the Scottsboro accusers] were now in the limelight as rape victims, ‘poor but virtuous’ white women whose honor had been sullied and who were in need of kindness and protection.”¹⁹ Even when the respectability of the white women was in question, whiteness consolidated vis-à-vis the black rape narrative provided a certain bulwark against the consequences of sexual transgression. As one court spectator of the Scottsboro case in the 1930s asserted, the alleged victim “might be a fallen woman, but by God she is a white woman.”²⁰

Further, while there was harsh punishment meted out for actual or perceived attempts to sexually engage with a white woman, there is evidence that black male desire for white women that was suspected but not acted upon tended to be tolerated to an extent, because it confirmed the ultimate desirability of white women. Dorr notes that when “juries [in the postbellum South] faced cases in which black men did little more than express sexual desire for white women,” they tended to be lenient.²¹ This is because, she surmises, “those expressions, though seeming to confirm white men's worst fears [also] confirmed that black men found white women desirable...which placed white women in an exalted position.”²² William Faulkner confirms in his short story *Dry September* that being the object of real or imagined black male desire infuses the white female “victim” with an aura of intrigue. His main character, an aging spinster named Minnie, finds as she walks through town that “sitting and lounging men did not even follow her with their eyes anymore”²³ After claiming that she was attacked by a black man her status changes dramatically. As one literary scholar interprets, “by virtue of the rumored taboo, Minnie attains the solicitous attention of her peers who had formerly shunned her ... as if she has recovered her youth through her fantasied encounter with a black man. Minnie regains her sexual attractiveness in the eyes of the community by harnessing one of the few available sources of power for a white woman” – the power of accusation against black men.²⁴ Even though she had been seen around town with a married man, Minnie’s respectability is miraculously restored, with an added sexual allure, by consolidating the racial benefits of white femininity against the would-be black male rapist.

Thus, on the one hand, the myth of the black rapist served historically as a constraint on the mobility and the potential public safety of white women – as the general threat of rape and sexual violence still does. On the other hand, white women, in exchange for their complicity in maintaining the racial-sexual hierarchy, were able to wield power over black men, and in turn were exalted as the pinnacle of feminine desirability – a position that continues to be leveraged in contemporary gaze empowerment discourse. Thus, as will be elaborated throughout this chapter, the racial and

sexual politics of miscegenation provide both, in film theorist Susan Courtney's words, "the sanction and the limit" of women's empowerment.²⁵

Flirting with danger: the black male gaze as the "sanction" of female empowerment



Figure 4.4 Lady Gaga captures the look of a dangerous looming figure of black masculinity in "Judas"²⁶

In many of their videos Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga repeatedly depict themselves as the object of the diegetic black male gaze. Gwen Stefani establishes her desirability through her interactions with black R&B or rap artists she features in the songs, through the fixed gaze of her male back-up dancers, and through an implied black gaze in her *King Kong* sequence in "Wind it Up." For instance, in both "Luxurious" and "Sweet Escape," black men (Slim Thug and Akon respectively) serve as the male counterpoint, both vocally and narratively, in the videos. In "Luxurious," Slim Thug provides a rap interlude to Stefani's lyrics which conflate money and wealth with romantic love.²⁷ At one point in the video, we see Stefani hold her hands out making the sign for money, as Slim Thug looks at her (see figure 4.5). As Slim Thug gazes at Stefani, rather than the money she is pantomiming, he sets up the notion that Stefani is the real prize, the metaphoric

wealth of the story. Affirming Dyer's notion that blondness is conflated with wealth, the bright lighting which contrasts her white blondness against Slim Thug's blackness spotlights her even more in this song which is about metaphoric luxury. Stefani explicitly uses Slim Thug's attentiveness, as a representation of black masculinity, to establish her feminine value and power.



Figure 4.5 Stefani holds the attention of Slim Thug in “Luxurious”²⁸

A similar dynamic also plays out in Stefani's video “Sweet Escape,” where black R&B artist Akon keeps his eyes on her rather than the road (*see figure 4.6*).²⁹ They are pulled over by the police shortly after this moment which highlights the socially policed and illicit nature of a white girl in the car with a black man and thus heightens the sense of danger and taboo. Akon's willingness to take the risk to drive Stefani's getaway car in spite of the risks associated with it emphasizes the power of her desirability.



Figure 4.6 Akon fixes his gaze on Stefani rather than the road in “Sweet Escape”³⁰

In addition to visually identifying the white woman as the object of desire, the black male gaze is tied *lyrically* to the production of the white female performers as sexual subjects. For example, in her anthem of self-proclaimed sexiness, “Fergalicious,” Fergie combines lyrics which establish her desirability as a woman with the visual representation of the sexual gaze of black men and other men of color.³¹ In the chorus of the song, which defines “Fergalicious” as the combination of her name, Fergie, and the sexually connotative term “delicious,” she emphasizes: “*So delicious (it's hot, hot)/ So delicious (I put them boys on rock, rock)/ So delicious (they wanna slice of what I got)/ I'm Fergalicious (t-t-t-t-tasty, tasty).*”³² The “boys” who are put on “rock, rock” and who “wanna slice of what” Fergie has to offer in the video are almost exclusively men of color. For instance, when Fergie suggests that men are “*lining down the block just to watch what I got,*” the video cuts to four black men dressed identically in urban street wear, thrusting against giant candy canes (see figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7 Fergie puts the “boys on rock, rock” in “Fergalicious”³³

In other scenes, they unsuccessfully chase after her kiss, represented by cartoon lips flying around the scene and lick their candy canes to underscore the connection between deliciousness and sexuality.



Figure 4.8 Emphasizing the erotic connection between delicious and desire³⁴

In addition to these four young Black men and a vast cast of multi-ethnic background dancers, both male and female, Will.i.am, her fellow Black Eyed Pea and producer, repeatedly embodies a desiring male gaze directed at Fergie. Alongside sustained adoring looks, Will.i.am designates Fergie lyrically as “delicious” and “tasty,” and, at one point even explicitly calls out their racial difference by saying “*white girl, you tasty.*”



Figure 4.9 Will.i.am looks at the “fourth wall” to signify looking at Fergie. This meta-look shifts the knowing gaze from the narrative to the spectator.³⁵

In one on-line debate about whether Fergie is indeed as sexy and delicious as the designation “Fergalicious” suggests, a participant asked whether it was sufficient that Fergie could self-designate as delicious, i.e., was Fergie “Fergalicious” just because she said so?³⁶ Although a somewhat absurd online debate follows, the question highlights the precariousness of a self-proclamation of desirability in the social realm. Instead, it seems, a woman requires outside male validation to be properly identified as sexually desirable. Thus, within the representational structure of the video itself, Fergie is designated as fergalicious, not just because she says so, but because black men and other men of color say so, through their lyrics, their gaze, and their lustful behaviors.

Lady Gaga also explicitly uses the diegetic black male gaze, and the strategic use of the black rapper to emphasize her own desirability. For example, in the “Paparazzi” video, Lady Gaga sings about the conflation of visuality and desire through the metaphor of the paparazzi.³⁷ She suggests that devotion is directly connected to the photo and its scopophilic connotations: “*Got my flash on, it's true/ Need that picture of you/It's so magical...*”³⁸ Through the fan’s desire to look and to capture the image of Lady Gaga, Lady Gaga is designated as the superstar. Yet in the video, her sole representation of the paparazzi photo is one framed by men of color (see figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10 Lady Gaga “reaches the top yet again” under the watchful eye of black desire³⁹

And, in a piece by photographer David LaChapelle which was included in liner notes of the limited edition “Super deluxe” version of her album the *Fame Monster*, Lady Gaga updates the primitivist visual tropes of *King Kong* through use of contemporary black rapper (Kanye West) in an overt invocation of interracial desire and taboo.

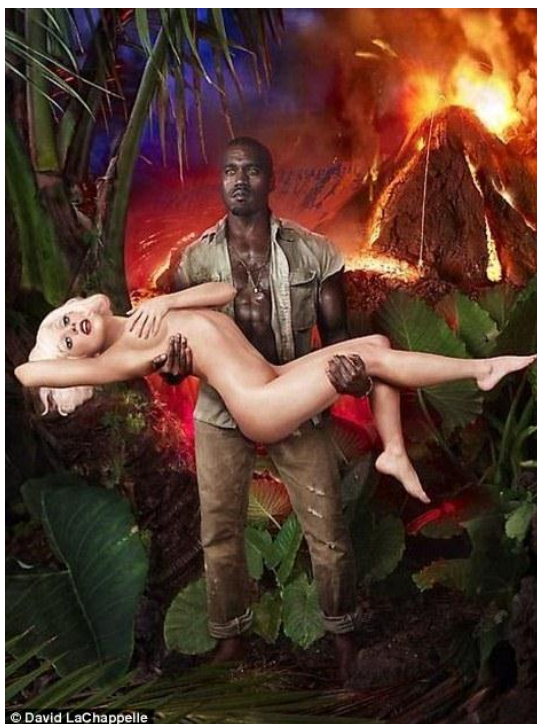


Figure 4.11 It’s not Kanye West’s desire that lady Gaga seeks per se, but rather that the spectator knows that she is the most desirable one⁴⁰

What is highlighted by the meta-representations of the black male gaze in these videos – such as Lady’s Gaga’s use of a picture within a video, or Fergie’s depiction of the movie camera — is that the spectator is invited to look not only at Lady Gaga, Gwen Stefani or Fergie themselves, but also to look at, and be a witness to, the act of black men looking. As discussed in the previous chapter, this “awarishness” – what some call a postmodern self-reflexivity – is argued to produce a knowing feminist spectator who disrupts the “invisible guest” element of the male gaze by recognizing and exposing it. But as film theorists Jane Gaines, Susan Courtney, and others have discussed, the racial taboo of black men looking at white women already disrupts the authoritative position of this male gaze. In other words, the diegetic black male gaze does not function the way Mulvey describes the (universal) male gaze – a conflation between the on-screen male gaze, the camera gaze, and the spectator’s point of view into one dominant patriarchal position. Instead, on-screen black male gaze is split from and countered by a racially privileged spectator who scrutinizes the black gaze for racial indiscretions.⁴¹ Thus, as discussed in the next section, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga take advantage of the already circumscribed black male position vis-à-vis the male gaze in their feminist attempts to subvert, contain, or re-direct the effects of the patriarchal gaze.

In sum, an adoring male sexual gaze is integral to the depiction of these artists as desirable, or the subject-objects of gaze empowerment theorized in the previous chapter. To amplify this dynamic, these white female performers use black men and other men of color to add a heightened mystique of sexual tension that primitivist discourses and racial taboo provide. But as the next sections detail, these white artists also take advantage of the racial cultural sanctions around black masculinity in order to symbolically control, foreclose, and manage this sexual tension — using historical narratives of unequal racial positions to bolster feminist fantasies around sexuality, danger, and containment.

Taming the Beast: Rape Dare and the (feminist) politics of “Look but Don’t Touch”

The myth of the black rapist —and the cultural depiction of black men as insatiable sexual beasts — provides feminist discourses with not only a magnified sense of sexuality, but also provides what Watts and Orbe call “lightning in a bottle” or “a brilliant danger.”⁴² As such, the racially saturated figure of raw masculinity provides a mechanism for feminist fears around sexual danger, rape, and male aggression to be “triggered... only to have them strategically vented.”⁴³ This section examines how the sexual threat circulating through the myth of the black rapist — combined with racist histories of the suppression of black masculinity — provides a racial scaffold for a feminist rape-dare dynamic that is repeatedly invoked in the videos under analysis. Throughout the videos, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga tease and flirt with men of color, yet invoke a number of narrative devices that maintain certain sexual boundaries and keep racial lines intact.

The fear of being overcome by male aggression or the persistent, ever-present shadow of rape has accompanied women’s feminisms or expanded participation in the public sphere throughout the historical record. Thus, rape, both literally and metaphorically, has been a central tenet of feminist theorizing about patriarchy and the feminist imagination.⁴⁴ In the seventies and eighties, a dramatic narrative structure of rape-revenge erupted into cinema in horror films like *I Spit on Your Grave*, as well as mainstream female buddy films like *Thelma and Louise*. While there is a wide variation in the political stances of these films, and a number of feminist film critics diagnose many of these as emerging from male backlash and fear of changing gender roles, the rape-revenge genre has also provided the opportunity for feminist fantasy and oppositional viewing pleasure.⁴⁵ For instance, Jacinda Read argues that from a feminist perspective, “what these films, with their rape-avenging women and final girls, are actually about” is “women’s refusal to get back in their place, their refusal to be killed off, their refusal to live in fear and danger.”⁴⁶ Film scholars McCaughey and King focus on the spectatorial pleasure of young women who watch rape-revenge

narratives on screen in their book *Reel Knockouts*. They argue that regardless of any number of problems that could be identified with sexy, violent women, they “find that most of our university students cheer when we screen such images.”⁴⁷

In the 2000s, overt rape-revenge fantasies still circulate in cinema such as *Kill Bill* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. However, contemporary feminist fantasy tends to circulate more around pre-emptively averting the violation, or what seems to be more of a “rape-dare” narrative. With the rape revenge narratives of the past decades informing the present, the established possibility of violent revenge allows for young women to create empowering fantasies of a sexual dare. For example, “SlutWalks” have been held in many cities around the world ever since a Toronto police officer warned women in 2011 that in order to avoid rape, women should not dress like “sluts.”⁴⁸ In response, young women have taken to the streets in provocative clothing to publicly claim the right to public sexual display. SlutWalks have a far different tone than Take Back the Night marches of the nineties, which advertise their event in response to the fearful scenario: “A woman walks alone down a dark, deserted street. With every shadow she sees, and every sound she hears, her pounding heart flutters and skips a beat.”⁴⁹ Instead, in corsets and garters, scantily clad women celebrate in their sexuality and presence in the streets, with the backdrop of the rape-revenge narrative backing them. Instead of the angry message of the Take Back the Night marches, SlutWalks have an ethos of a sexual dare: men can look and desire, but if they cross the line, there is hell to pay.



Figure 4.12 Young women strut their stuff on SlutWalks⁵⁰

This narrative of rape-revenge-dare shows up most prevalently in Lady Gaga's videos, such as in "Bad Romance," when she appears in the final scene with the torched skeletal remains of the man who presumably purchased her in the video's sex trafficking narrative.⁵¹ In the body of the video Lady Gaga and her back-up dancers dance with burlesque styling, revealing clothing, and sexual confidence. The new feminist sensibility – represented in "Bad Romance" and SlutWaks – does not contest being the object of the male desiring gaze per se. Rather, it is the line that is crossed between looking and touching, wanting and taking that is vigorously defended in the feminist popular imagination, and which apparently lead to the demise of the man in the "Bad Romance" video.

The racial power dynamics of the desiring black man fits in the third wave feminist narrative of the dare confrontation with alarming convenience. On the one hand, centuries of racist primitivist hysteria about the sexual appetite and aggression of black men towards white women cast them as ready symbols of the male rape threat. As Angela Davis and others have noted, the racial grounds of the myth of the black rapist often go unexamined in feminist anti-rape discourses and thus the figure continues to haunt feminist theory.⁵² In popular culture, which Eric Lott has argued provides a dreamscape for the racial unconscious to emerge, the presumption of the sexually dangerous black man circulates with regularity.⁵³ For instance, at least one film scholar argues that even motorcycle outlaw films are based on this cultural narrative, with the black leather-clad biker riding into town, threatening young white women. Lisa Nelson contends: "It was along these fault lines that the specter of the motorcycle outlaw rode into the U.S. imaginary because it is haunted by desegregation's imaginary monstrosity, the black rapist."⁵⁴

At the same time, the long history of lynching, imprisonment, and other forms of racial terrorism done in the name of foreclosing the black sexual threat means that black men are perhaps the most socially patrolled of all male subjects, as well as self-policing around white women. As Ida

Well-Barnett wrote at the turn of the 20th century: “under this reign of 'unwritten law,' no colored man, no matter what his reputation, is safe from lynching if a white woman, no matter what her standing or motive, cares to charge him with insult or assault.”⁵⁵ As a result, historian Dorr elaborated, while white women learned to be afraid of black men through the constant invocation of the myth of the black rapist, the use of the myth as pretense for lynching led black men to “tread carefully” around white women.⁵⁶ As such, black men in the U.S. have perhaps the most regulated masculinity and sexuality in terms of social policing of all the male groups.

Thus, for a feminist empowerment drama which involves a pre-emptive dare —i.e. a highly sexually charged encounter which draws a line the man cannot cross —the use of a black man both adds to the sense of sexual danger while at the same time more readily guarantees a female victory because that man is already bound by a racist history that has signified crossing the line as a suicidal act (to paraphrase Emmett Till’s murderers).⁵⁷

In the videos of Lady Gaga, Fergie, and Gwen Stefani, the depiction of a self-restrained yet desirous male subject emerges through repeated scenes of black men and other men of color looking but not touching and through the white women presented as the more powerful sexual actors, rubbing against or touching the men with impunity. This racialized ‘look but don’t touch’ dare is dramatically illustrated in Fergie’s “London Bridge” video through three particular sequences.

First, when Fergie sexually and aggressively rubs up against a black man who is uniformed as the Queen’s guard, she takes advantage of the structure of the dare. In this scenario, Fergie rubs and grinds against the man all she wants and he cannot touch her back. In fact, by tradition, the British Queen’s guard cannot even move their heads or smile, let alone react to Fergie’s sexual advances. Thus, the black racial taboo is amplified and supported through the structural position of the Queen’s guard, providing a racial scaffold for a feminist empowerment narrative to emerge. Fergie can be very sexual —in fact she can be the sexual actor rather than the passive recipient –

without immediate repercussions. She can play with fire —through sexual and racial taboo — and yet emerge unscathed.



Figure 4.13 Fergie grinds against the Queen's guard⁵⁸



Figure 4.14 Fergie even licks the Queen's guard.⁵⁹

Fergie also combines the racial taboo with the cultural rules against touching that organizes the looking relations in strip clubs. In a strip club, female dancers can touch the men, and men can look, but they will be thrown out of the club if they touch the dancers in return. In "London Bridge," Fergie table dances in the inner sanctum of the gentleman's club for an audience of mostly men of color without fear. She sings, *"I'm such a lady, but I'm dancing like a 'ho/but I don't give a fuck so here*

*we go.*⁶⁰ While her insistence that she does not care suggests she is not worried about public opinion which might denigrate her as a less than proper lady (i.e. a “ho”), the lyrics also support that she is not worried about the dangers of dancing in a sexually provocative manner because of the injunction against touching.



Figure 4.15 Fergie dances for an audience of black men in “London Bridge.”⁶¹

Finally, in a key sequence of the video, Fergie singles out a well-dressed, young black man, and backs him up the stairs into a chair, where she proceeds to undress him. He offers no resistance, and other than staring into her eyes (and at other body parts), he sits passively. He does not touch back as Fergie removes his clothing. In fact, his avoidance of touching her is what allows Fergie to back him up the stairs and down into a chair. Conjuring the sexual display as hypnosis story-line of *Suckerpunch*, Fergie seems to have mesmerized the young man into submission through her desirability. However, Fergie also draws on racial narratives of white domination and

black submission as she lay claim to his symbols of power (male clothing) in order to gain entrance into the inner sanctum of the gentlemen's club.



Figure 4.16 In this series of images, the young man leans back in fear or awe; Fergie holds him down; Fergie dons the tie she just removed from him; and Fergie touches his head in dominating fashion.⁶²

In all three scenarios, Fergie combines racial taboo with other cultural narratives of 'look but don't touch' to set up the feminist scenario of the pre-emptive dare. Fergie can be publicly sexy, desirable, and even sexually aggressive with black men and other men of color because these men either adhere to institutional rules and prohibitions, as in the case of the queen's guard, the strip club attendees, and the young man in the above mentioned scenarios of "London Bridge," or they are culturally policed, such as in the scenes mentioned above in which police interrupt the Bonnie and Clyde romance between Fergie and Ludacris in "Glamorous," or between Gwen Stefani and Akon in "Sweet Escape." In case the men of color in these scenarios are tempted to 'forget their place' in the racial hierarchy Fergie reminds them lyrically:

You can look but you can't touch it
If you touch it I'ma start some drama
You don't want no drama
No, no drama, no no no no drama
So don't pull on my hand boy
*You ain't my man, boy*⁶³

With a history of lynching hanging over the interracial encounter, Fergie's warning that she might "start some drama" and that they "don't want no drama" conjures both the power of accusation that white women yielded over black men, as well as the extreme danger such interracial encounters held for black men. Further, her reduction of the men to "boys," a term she uses both in this video and in "Fergalicious," as well as touching the head of the man in the "London Bridge" scenario could be read simply as a gender inversion scenario where women empower themselves through the containment and minimizing of male power. However, Fergie pairs the term "boy" almost exclusively with visual representations men of color (with the exception of one white kid in "Fergalicious" who is actually a young boy). In doing so, Fergie invokes Jim Crow racist discourse designed to minimize and ridicule black masculinity under the alibi of gender empowerment. In these scenarios, a *woman* does structure herself as more powerful than the *men* looking at her, which is the core feminist move in gaze empowerment discourse. But she does so through invoking a historically constructed and defended racial hierarchy that grants certain privileges of position to *white women over black men*.

These allusions to racial hierarchy highlight a second key race and gendered power struggle in the videos. In addition to the sexual gaze tension, there is a more basic power struggle between white women and men of color that dates back to early feminism in both the United States and Britain. That is, rather than seek to dismantle patriarchy by competing with white men for positions of power and influence, white women sought to establish themselves as racial allies with white men in the projects of nation building and colonialism. Feminist claims for greater social freedom and influence at the turn of the 19th century were typically based on relative positioning based on race, or the desire to wield more social power than men and women of color, rather than an attack on

white men or patriarchy as a whole.⁶⁴ In the U.S. when black men were awarded the vote before white women —what they called the “Republican betrayal of women”— white women began to use “precepts of evolutionist theories concerning social progress, women’s nature, and racial difference” to advance feminist goals.⁶⁵ Indeed, post-bellum feminist rhetoric shifted sharply to emphasize racial superiority and attack the new gains by men of color. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, considered a leading figure in the suffragist movement, decried in 1869: “think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who cannot read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling-book, making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine I. Rose, and Anna E. Dickinson [educated elite white women].”⁶⁶ At the same time in Britain, early feminists began making claims for greater public roles so that they could become allies and partners in the stewardship of the British Empire (which was maintained, in part, through ideologies of racial difference and hierarchy). Historian Burton suggests that “in virtually all forms of ideological production - middle-class British feminists of the period invoked the glories of empire in order to ally their cause with its global power and its social mission.”⁶⁷ Both sets of feminists drew on racial stratification to position themselves as allies with white men who could share the “burden” of maintaining racial and imperial hierarchies.

This relational racial positioning continues to circulate in the representational politics of popular culture in a number of ways. First, by positing black men and other men of color as the primary foil for a feminist power-over, or rape-dare, narrative, it invokes the historical tendency of white feminists to pragmatically target relational superiority over men through racial differentiation rather than universal gender equity or the dismantling of white patriarchy. For instance, when Fergie wants to break into the “gentlemen’s club” in “London Bridge,” presumably a metaphor for the music industry, she targets a young black man to disrobe and replace. If black men have access to the ol’ boys club of corporate music ownership and production, it is both proportionately less than white men and quite recent. However, like Stanton’s attack on newly

enfranchised black and immigrant men, white women have historically targeted the less powerful men in the patriarchal structure.

This tendency to target men of color for the feminist power-over narrative is illustrated in the film *Suckerpunch*, which was used in chapter 3 to discuss the tendencies of gaze empowerment discourse of contemporary feminism. In *Suckerpunch*, the white patriarchal structural relations of gender are metaphorically symbolized by the character of the stepfather, the "high roller" (aka lobotomy doctor), and the institution itself. However, the primary villain of the film and the male perpetrator who is ultimately defeated by the heroine Babydoll, is the Latino orderly (turned pimp/nightclub director in fantasy sequences), Blue Jones.



Figure 4.17: Blue Jones (*right*) glaring at the girls of *Suckerpunch*⁶⁸

Oscar Isaac, the Guatemalan-born actor who plays Jones, acknowledges his character is not the most powerful man in the patriarchy hierarchy. Isaac describes Jones as "someone who's generally been pretty powerless in his life. And so he uses this position at this kind of unorganized, slightly chaotic old asylum to have a position of power."⁶⁹ At the end of the film, it is the relatively less powerful man of color who is defeated by the women's resistance, while the institution remains intact. As Blue is being taken away by police towards the end of the film, we hear him yelling, "It's not me you want, it's the stepfather!"⁷⁰ The white stepfather, whose position as patriarch of the

family put him in a position to victimize Babydoll, and her mother and sisters in ways which launched the entire captivity and violation sequence in the first place, remains uncontested and secure. The Latino orderly, on the other hand, provides the “lightning in a bottle” to ignite feminist rage, and discharge it through his exposure and downfall.

Another powerful way that the historical narratives of racial competition between white women and black men emerge in the videos is the primary subject of the next chapter. In brief, the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga draw on historical inequalities of power that put men of color in subjugated positions of service to white women as part of feminist empowerment narratives. I introduce it in this chapter because it provides another vehicle through which racialized male desire directed towards white women is contained in a way that provides feminist narrative pleasure. In addition to controlling male sexuality through historical sanctions against interracial desire, these white women (Gwen Stefani, Fergie, and Lady Gaga) also structure themselves as more powerful than the men of color in their videos through labor relations or colonial mobility. For example, Lady Gaga depicts black men and other men of color as her butlers in “Paparazzi,” her kitchen staff in “Telephone,” and as colonized natives in “Alejandro.” I will elaborate the labor relations more fully in the next chapter, but the colonial narrative in Lady Gaga’s “Alejandro” importantly illustrates another containment strategy which exceeds the black-white discourse, yet maps onto the same racialized sexual empowerment narratives discussed thus far.

The lyrics and video for Lady Gaga’s song “Alejandro” highlight Latino, rather than black men, as the foil for active female sexuality. The video features a group of interchangeable dark-haired men whom Lady Gaga refers to by the Latino names Alejandro, Fernando (in homage to Abba’s song of the same name), and Roberto.⁷¹ Using the same push and pull ambivalence of interracial desire in the pleasure-danger-containment model, Lady Gaga takes images of interracial sexual contact past all previous admonitions about touch established by Fergie and Gwen Stefani while simultaneously disavowing the contact as a relationship. The lyrics and other visual devices

(such as queerness as I will discuss below) conveys to the audience that the sexual encounters are casual at most. For example, the video shows a series of aggressive sexual encounters with presumably Latino men who grind against her at various points. Notably from a feminist perspective, the video also features Lady Gaga as the “top” or the sexual actor against a receptive male.

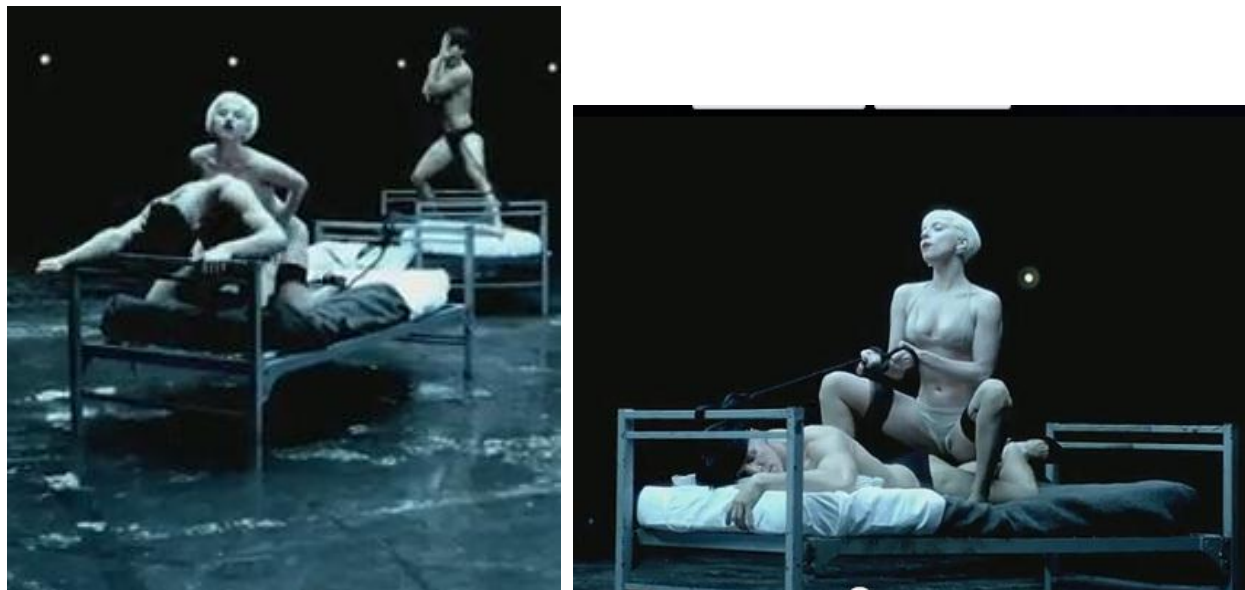


Figure 4.18 Lady Gaga as the sexual aggressor in “Alejandro”⁷²

In these images, Lady Gaga shatters the active/passive dichotomy of Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory beyond mere looking relations. In these almost pornographic sequences, Lady Gaga takes over the traditionally male role of sexual aggressor or actor, not only inverting the gaze, but inverting sexual roles in the sexual act itself. However, not to be limited to only one position, Lady Gaga is not always the top, and in some scenes, allows the men to return the touch in ways that are not present in Fergie and Gwen Stefani’s videos.

However, while Lady Gaga crosses many racially regulated sexual lines previously established in popular music video, there is still a racial-sexual boundary drawn and maintained. First of all, there is a colonial narrative which circulates in the cultural memory that authorizes an upper class white woman’s domination over men of color and makes this gender inversion of

women as the sexual aggressor legible. Shohat and Stam suggest that in the colonial context, the "ephemeral superiority granted European women" creates a scenario for powerful female fantasies in popular culture because "the national identity of the White female 'character' is relatively privileged over the sexual identity of dark male figures."⁷³ While they argue that the "imperial narrative is ultimately masculinist," they point out that the colonial context and the privilege of race, class, and nationality temporarily gives white women the ability to occupy the dominant role when traveling in the colonies (literally and metaphorically).⁷⁴ Especially in the absence of white men, white women are able to step into the position of authority and wield the "active (colonial) gaze" as the "sole delegate... of Western civilization."⁷⁵ They also recognize the feminist temptation provided by these scenarios which allow economically advantaged women "freedom to travel and 'realize herself'" or provide backdrops for films featuring "venturesome female protagonists."⁷⁶ But these feminist potentials, Shohat and Stam clearly argue, depend on reproducing imperial discourses of racial difference and hierarchy, civilization and primitivism, first world center and third world margins.

The updated version of Shohat and Stam's colonial female adventurer may be found in the white European or North American female sex tourist who use her economic and national privilege of leisure travel for sexual encounters with "beach boys" in the Caribbean, Asia, Africa or Middle East – i.e. former colonial locations. As one sociologist noted, "in 'economies of pleasure' in Bali, for example, or in Barbados, white women seek boyfriends in an inversion of the gender but not the race or class politics of sex tourism encounters."⁷⁷ In these encounters, white women are able to form temporary relationships with sexually attractive men of color because of their economic and nationally privileged mobility structured through colonial and neo-colonial relations of power. As temporary love affairs which are geographically isolated, they also escape the scrutiny around miscegenation because they do not replace or displace white patriarchy at home.

The colonial ethos of white women sampling exotic beach boys emerges not only visually in “Alejandro,” but musically and lyrically as well. Critics have identified in “Alejandro” the influences of Abba’s “Fernando,” Ace of Base’s reggae-dub beats, and Madonna’s “La Isla Bonita.” Notably, all three of these influences involve white, particularly white female, appropriation of Latino and/or Caribbean music, men, vibes, and narratives. Lyrically, Lady Gaga also identifies her (rejected) love as “*hot like Mexico*.” And her run through a list of Latino names –Alejandro, Fernando, Roberto – which, mimicked visually by the scores of interchangeable dark-haired men in the video, suggests there is not a primary love affair with a single Latino male, but a general attraction and rejection of the bunch of them.

The neo-colonial narrative of sex tourism provides a potentially robust container for gender inversion through interracial pleasure that is contained by colonial distance. However, “Alejandro” balances the graphic sexuality of the video with two strong disavowals. Lyrically, this is a song about rejection. Despite the passionate sexual interaction in the video, the lyrics are essentially telling Alejandro, et al, to leave her alone. The oft-repeated chorus of the song tells Alejandro, Fernando, and Roberto that she does not want them, or any future contact with them:

*Don't call my name. Don't call my name, Alejandro.
I'm not your babe. I'm not your babe, Fernando.
Don't wanna kiss, don't wanna touch.
Just smoke my cigarette and hush.
Don't call my name. Don't call my name, Roberto.*⁷⁸

The central lyric “I’m not your babe,” strongly establishes the grounds that regardless of any sexual activity you may have seen on the screen, there is no romantic relationship at stake here. The lyric “don’t call my name” invokes both the image of active pursuit by beach boys calling out to female tourists, as well as a denial of intersubjectivity. In other words, while there may be anonymous sexual encounters across cultural lines as evidenced in the sexual scenes in the video, Lady Gaga rejects the familiarity of his calling her by her name. The line “don’t wanna kiss, don’t wanna touch, just smoke my cigarette and hush” also implies a casual sexual encounter, where the clichéd role for

the man after sex is to roll over, smoke a cigarette, and reject further intimate contact such as cuddling. In the temporary gender inversion of the colonial encounter, Lady Gaga presumes the male role of sexual consumer. “*Don’t bother me*” she orders later in the song.⁷⁹

So, in sum, Alejandro represents yet another instance of interracial desire and foreclosure in which white women leverage the unequal relations of racial, class, and national power established through histories of imperialism to invert gendered sexual scripts and construct fantasies of female empowerment. In “Alejandro,” Lady Gaga provides feminist pleasure through her ability to sexually dominate a number of sexy racially differentiated men, as well as allows for the dangerous tension of the interracial contact to emerge visually. At the same time, the dangerous liaison is contained through the lyrical disavowal that any such relationship will ever exist. Instead, the song rejects Alejandro, and Fernando, and Roberto, and forbids them to assume future intimate familiarity with a white woman, even if a sexual encounter has occurred in the past. Thus, women can enjoy this sexual empowerment of the casual encounter with a certain impunity, because they do so on the backs of men who historically could lay no claim to a white woman.

Containing Dangerous Miscegenies: Protecting the White Family at the limit of white female empowerment

If black men and other men of color provide a sexual landscape against which white women can confront and contain what may be construed as “dangerous” male sexual desire as invoked by the myth of the black rapist, flirtations with miscegeny also represents another potential danger: transgression of the racial-sexual hierarchy which could undermine white women’s position of privilege. Because of what Aimee Carrillo Rowe theorizes as “relational” privilege — the idea that white women’s racial and class privileges are bolstered by their familial proximity to white men — white women, even white feminists, may have an investment in preserving the white patriarchal structure as part of their own bid for power.⁸⁰ Thus, as cross-racial fraternization has the potential

to mark white women as race traitors, the “dangerous miscegenies” that provide the opportunity — the “sanction” — for feminist empowerment narratives, also invoke a “limit “on (white) feminist transgression. This section explores the ways the dangerous miscegenies invoked in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are contained and foreclosed in ways that also bolster white hetero-patriarchy, the sanctity of the white family structure, and thus white women’s dubiously-privileged position within it.

Through her study comparing white and women-of-color academic feminists and their differential access to institutional power, Carrillo Rowe finds that the “trope of the white family” serves as an organizing “intimacy” through which “white women build familial ties with men in power.”⁸¹ This familial trope, in turn, “provides an intimate channel through which power is transmitted... *within* racial lines and *across* gender lines.”⁸² Even though the white patriarchal family structure insists on gender subordination (i.e. serves as a limit on feminist transgression), it also creates pathways of empowerment based on racial privilege that Carrillo Rowe demonstrates white feminists use to negotiate for power in masculine institutions. As Audre Lorde points out, because of this “white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power.”⁸³ However, true to the argument put forth in this dissertation, Carrillo Rowe insists that “this is not to say that these women are duped by power; their accounts do acknowledge power imbalances.”⁸⁴ Rather, she argues, this intimate familial tie to white men — both literal and metaphoric— is experienced as pleasurable by some white women, “a pleasure, it seems, derived from the convergence between (hetero) sexual and social power.”⁸⁵

Thus, if a white woman’s access to power is dependent on the familial connection to white men, then the threat of interracial desire to the patriarchal white family may also endanger the avenues of power that these white female performers are relying on for their empowerment narratives. As historian Lisa Lindquist Dorr notes, in the early 20th century for a white woman “to acknowledge consensual relations with a black man meant voluntarily rejecting the core of white

femininity and the ultimate forfeiture of white status and privilege.”⁸⁶ If the symbolic resonances of this relational privilege still operate in the representational field, then playing with tropes of miscegenation constitutes a dangerous game – a danger which must be negotiated carefully.

In this light, the strong sanctions against interracial touch and the disavowal of intimate interracial relationships that emerge in the lyrics and visual displays of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga also make sense as a way of protecting the white family from the interracial threat. Further, reassurance of white women’s loyalty to the sanctity of the white family also erupts in the videos and meta-discourses about the stars through white heterosexual marriage — or the promise of marriage — by the stars themselves. A related theme that circulates through Lady Gaga’s videos is the containment of the reproductive threat to the white patriarchal family through strategic queerness.

A first prevalent theme of containment in the videos and interviews of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga is that the legitimacy of the interracial contact is weakened, questioned, and restrained in comparison to the white heterosexual dyadic romance — a romance which is emphasized in the personal lives of the artists. For instance, as already discussed in chapter 2, Fergie depicts her relationship with a cholo in “Big Girls Don’t Cry” as part of an adolescent phase. She sings, “*and I’m gonna miss you like a child misses their blanket/ But I’ve got to get a move on with my life/ It’s time to be a big girl now.*”⁸⁷ Both this song and the trajectory of her personal romantic biography show that she wants to make clear that interracial dalliances are tolerated as temporary excursions of youth, but the mature relationship is reserved for white heterosexual unions.

In “Fergalicious,” Fergie dismisses the attention from the black male pursuers, who chase after her kiss in the video, and depicts instead the kiss landing on the cheek of a young white boy. As the only white male present in the vast cast of characters in the video, it seems to re-iterate that he is the only legitimate subject to receive her flying kiss. These moves demonstrate a defensive stance on Fergie’s part, anxious to show that while she may dabble in interracial desire, she

ultimately does not cross the line of propriety that would eject her from white familial privilege. For instance, in “Fergalicious,” Fergie also draws a sharp line between herself as a white female subject, and fellow pop artist Nelly Furtado whose Portuguese ancestry, Spanish-language albums, and suspect proximity to men of color in her videos and collaborations marks Furtado as non-white. Most notably, shortly before Fergie’s solo album was released, Nelly Furtado performed a chart-topping song “Promiscuous” with black Hip-hop artist Timbaland which suggests her sexual availability to a range of men not limited by race.⁸⁸ Fergie, on the other hand, in direct response to Furtado, claims that she might be “Fergalicious,” she certainly is “*not* promiscuous.”⁸⁹ Rather than being sexually available across racial lines like Furtado, Fergie only teases men of color in order to secure her position as desirable, but still maintain the sanctity of white femininity.

As a member of the Black Eyed Peas, a hip hop band otherwise made up of black, Latino and Asian-American men, Fergie’s relational intimacies with men of color has put her racial subjectivity under suspicion. Even in her solo career, the ever-present admiring gaze and companionship of producer and fellow Black Eyed Pea Will.i.am has cast a shadow on Fergie’s racial propriety. This intimate proximity to men of color, and her deployment of chola styling and hip-hop vocals, has invoked online debates about Fergie’s racial identification. For instance, one on-line fan asks, “What race is Fergie? I’m not a racist, I’m just curious. All of my friends think something different. Once thinks she’s white, one thinks she’s black, and one thinks she is Hispanic. I’m thinking Hispanic or black... I don’t know... lol. Do you?”⁹⁰ Even though Fergie’s racial background is almost completely white, her musical style, vocals, dress, and relational proximities to people of color seems to render her racially ambiguous.



Figure 4.19: Fergie is often seen out and around with Will.i.am from Black Eyed Peas⁹¹

However, since marrying white actor Josh Duhamel in 2009, Fergie's celebrity profile has shifted from uncertainty to endorsement.



Figure 4.20 Fergie and actor Josh Duhamel marry in a traditional Catholic wedding ceremony⁹²

The glowing coverage of Fergie's celebrity wedding suggests that her marriage to the white actor was destined, natural, and like a "good fairy tale" with a "storybook ending." For instance, *Elle*

magazine's feature spread of the wedding gushed: "You can't deny the kismet connection of this dreamboat and his dream girl, who lived through some starker realities before finding each other."⁹³ The starker realities of the past, which included Fergie's past history of drug use and teenage dating of cholos in Southern California, are forgiven as being part of the narrative tension that makes a good fairy tale ending in white matrimonial bliss.

Gwen Stefani follows a similar public trajectory with regards to interracial dating. Her early relationship to South Asian No Doubt bassist Tony Kanal is put in stark contrast – both in the celebrity press and in some of her videos —with her eventual marriage to white singer Gavin Rossdale, and the production of their blonde offspring. It is now well-known that Gwen Stefani dated Tony Kanal in her teens and early twenties. But at the time of their relationship they initially kept it a secret, because Kanal suggests that Gwen was considered off limits within the band. However, although their relationship could not be spoken about while they were in it, their break-up is quite publicly explored, leading to a number of Stefani/No Doubt songs, such "Don't Speak," "A Simple Kind of Life," and "Cool." Essentially, representation of her interracial romance only reached the public spotlight through the depiction of its impossibility and demise.

Her song and video, "Simple Kind of Life" is full of racial subtexts in its exploration of the collapse of her relationship to Kanal. The song details how Stefani wants a simple kind of life in which she can be a wife and mother, but with her Indian boyfriend Tony Kanal, "*it didn't work out,*" and everything turned out to be "*too complicated for my life.*"⁹⁴ The video opens with Stefani and Tony Kanal in intimate connection, where she admits "*for a long time I was in love.*"⁹⁵



Figure 4.21 Stefani and Kanal in intimate proximity in “Simple Kind of Life.”⁹⁶

But after saying it didn’t work out, Stefani is seen fleeing from a church wearing a wedding gown like a runaway bride, followed by a dream sequence where the band smashes endless rows of wedding cakes, symbolizing the impossibility of the “simple life” for this union. Towards the end of the video, Stefani admits her desire to be a mother, and wishes for an “accident,” presumably in terms of birth control. Yet the video sequence involves a highly racialized set of scenes in which Stefani finds a dark-skinned baby on the ground, his eyes drawn in black kohl, as per the tradition in India. She grabs the baby, wearing her wedding dress, but seems lost, like she has nowhere to go. The dark-skinned child perhaps represents the child she could have with Kanal if their relationship would have worked out.



Figure 4.22 Stefani in run-away bride frenzy, grabs the dark-skin child⁹⁷

Members of the band, the white guys as well as Tony Kanal, reach out their arms for her to hand over the baby, but she declines and runs towards a set of lights. Once there, she hands the baby instead to a black woman and then walks off the set to her make-up trailer.



Figure 4.23 Stefani hands off the child to a black woman⁹⁸

The racial subtext of this narrative gives context to the lyrics in which she wishes she could have the simple life of wife and mother, but in an interracial dynamic, these roles cease being simple to her. The juxtaposition of the dark baby to her crazed white bride-look suggests she is not the proper mother for this child, and instead hands the baby to the black woman. However, when she then walks off the set, the video uses the meta-shot discussed in the opening example to this chapter, to alert the viewer that this was all fiction to begin with.



Figure 4.24 Stefani walks off the set, showing this was all a performance⁹⁹

As the filming set-up shows, she did not *really* cross racial lines to have a non-white baby with Tony Kanal. She was just acting! As a perfect segue to what happens next in Gwen Stefani's life, the first viewer comment posted in response to this video on YouTube.com suggests she got the simple life she was looking for when she became a wife to and mother with white musician, Gavin Rossdale.

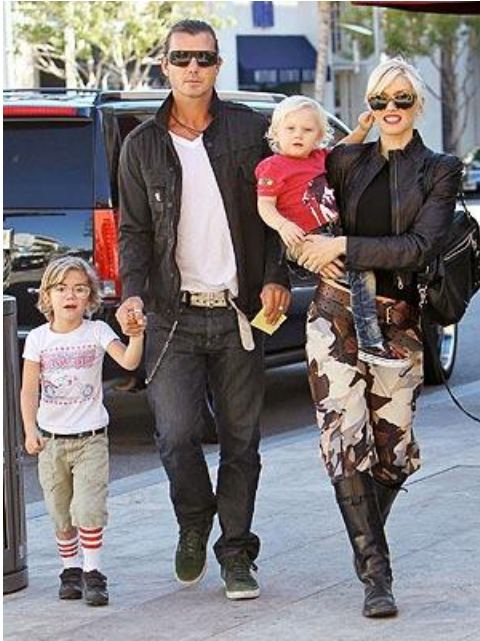


Figure 4.25 Gwen Stefani with husband Gavin Rossdale, and two children¹⁰⁰

Stefani, through her life and art, may use the erotic dangerous tensions of interracial desire to magnify her own visuality, but her public break-up with Kanal, and the nightmare-like sequence of the complications of that interracial romance depicted in “Simple Kind of Life” serve as a warning narrative about crossing the line between desire and consummation. Instead, her fairy-tale ending within the confines of the white hetero-family structure has also been celebrated by the media, which now obsessively features and quotes Stefani as a beacon of celebrity motherhood.

Although Lady Gaga is unmarried and trafficks heavily in interracial queer erotics in her videos, she ultimately upholds the same hegemonic notions of (white) heteronormative temporality that plays out in the lives of Fergie and Gwen Stefani. In other words, what she says in her interviews, and what is depicted in her personal life and the progression of her videos suggests that

for her too, the interracial, post-gendered, queer erotics of her videos represents only a temporary aesthetics of youth that will ultimately give way to white familial relations.

Lady Gaga has been lauded by scholars and fans for her queer transgressions and camp aesthetics.¹⁰¹ For instance, the implied love affair between herself and fellow superstar Beyoncé in the video “Telephone” has drawn praise from queer theorists and advocates, providing enough queer symbolisms and divas to make it, as one reporter for *Entertainment Weekly* described it, “Gay Christmas.”¹⁰² Queer theorist Jack Halberstam raves that Lady Gaga and Beyoncé “buzz around dangerously,” “like queen bees deciding to kick the drones to the curb while keeping their honey for themselves.”¹⁰³ The queer erotics in this video serve as a warning to men, he continues, “your girlfriend is turned on and she is escaping in a pussy wagon with another woman!”¹⁰⁴



Figure 4.26 Created by Yamino, a Gaga fan. Lady Gaga tweeted this pic to her followers, saying “I think the Pop Universe just imploded. Completely brilliant. Whoever made this: BRAVO.”¹⁰⁵

Tavia Nyong'o even argues that the queer-but-not-quite interracial union between Lady Gaga and Beyoncé “sidesteps the stale narratives that tend to script black/white collaboration as either ‘miscegenation’ or as a color-blind kumbayah moment.”¹⁰⁶ Instead, he argues, “their object-oriented lesbianism up-ends sexual anxieties based in reproductive logics and identitarian models of subjectivity” enabling them to “revisit an eroticized, racialized terrain only to drain it of its depressing teleology.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, for Nyong'o, the erotics between Lady Gaga and Beyoncé transgress and disrupt old narratives of miscegenation (and prohibitions) through its queerness.

And yet, Lady Gaga often dismisses or repudiates her own queerness. She tells French fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier: “It’s not fair to say that [I’m bisexual] because I’ve never really been in love with a woman before. I like women ... sexually.”¹⁰⁸ But she contains that sexual attraction as a diversion, but not a structuring difference, to an otherwise heteronormative trajectory. Despite all her forays into (interracial) queerness, Lady Gaga assures that she intends to marry and have children. In an interview with Oprah she asserts “I want kids, I want a soccer team, and I want a husband... [just] not yet.”¹⁰⁹ By saying “not yet,” Lady Gaga makes space – a container — for bracketing racial and sexual transgressions as youthful experiments, similar to Fergie ‘sowing her wild oats’ with cholos in her youth. Gaga reinforces this temporal perspective in her interview with French fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier: “I’m 25,” she tells him when she reveals she does not have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, “I’ve got ...my whole life ahead of me to have Gaga babies and those sorts of things.”¹¹⁰ By telling Gaultier that she’s currently too young to worry about relationships, she also simultaneously affirms that eventually, inevitably, she will settle down in socially recognizable ways and produce mimetic (and thus white) offspring, i.e. “Gaga babies.”

Her music videos also support an overarching white heteronormative temporal narrative. While some of her videos are replete with queer interracial erotics, such as “Telephone” and “Alejandro,” later videos such as “Judas” and “Yoü and I” emphasize not only heterosexual relationships, but cast white men as her primary love interests. For instance, Lady Gaga’s 2011

video “Judas” visually narrates her unquenchable desire for a white man, even when it seems to fly in the face of ‘enlightened’ sexual politics.¹¹¹ In a move similar to third wave feminism’s reclamation of girly culture from the political correctness of second wave feminism, Lady Gaga reclaims hetero-desire for a womanizing white man from the potential admonitions of pro-gay, feminist, and/or post-race sensibilities. The lyrics suggest that she knows it’s not the best choice of a man, who “*even after three times, he betrays*” her , but she can not help herself: “*I’m just a holy fool, oh baby it’s so cruel/ But I’m still in love with Judas, baby.*”¹¹² Lady Gaga seems to be racially progressive by casting the Latino actor Rick Gonzalez as the alpha male lead character “Jesus” with the white male actor Norman Reedus cast as the subordinate disciple “Judas.” However, since Jesus is the leader of a violent biker gang, Gaga is more predictably following the danger narrative around racialized hypermasculinity. With Jesus as the official partner of Lady Gaga’s Mary Magdalene, who rides on the back of his motorcycle and appears at his side, the white male Judas seems to be the displaced character, or what Susan Courtney called the “agonized subject.” However, Judas is ultimately saved from obscurity, because despite the costs of Lady Gaga’s betrayal to Jesus – they stone her to death in the final scene – she contains the danger by reassuring that Judas is the true object of her desire.



Figure 4.27 Gaga rides behind Latino Jesus¹¹³



Figure 4.28 But she really wishes she was with the womanizing Judas¹¹⁴

Although she reverses the typical designations by calling Jesus — the Latino gang leader — her “virtue” and Judas — the classic though non-heroic white subject — “the demon I cling to,” her reluctance to admit to her desire is understandable against the backdrop of her gender and sexual politics. In the sexual economy of queer, feminist politics, the womanizing, cheating, straight white guy should not capture her interest the way he does. But, as kind of an apology for white hetero-patriarchy, she suggests she just can not help going back to this arrangement.



Figure 4.29 Gaga is killed at the end for her betrayal of Jesus¹¹⁵

Her stoning death at the end might signify an ultimate rejection of the destructive relationship with Judas which could complicate or unsettle patriarchal representation. But, as Jesus

and his disciples are the ones who kill Gaga, not Judas, it might also serve as a warning narrative for white women not to go too deep into the dangerous world of interracial erotics, because she may not be able to return – a message which echoes early twentieth century rhetoric against miscegenation.

Finally, Lady Gaga has recently admitted to being in a relationship with the white love interest of her 2012 video “You and I” — an actor named Taylor Kinney who also appears on the television series, *The Vampire Diaries*. Again echoing the discourse that despite the detours they take, these stars will ultimately come back to a naturalized white heteronormative trajectory, the lyrics hail her return: “*It's been a long time since I came around/ Been a long time but I'm back in town/ This time I'm not leaving without you.*”¹¹⁶ Using a screenshot from the video, in which Lady Gaga appears in a white wedding dress in the arms of Kinney, the celebrity press celebrates the union. Says one commentator in the *Hollywood Reporter*: “Well, this certainly does not look like a ‘Bad Romance.’”¹¹⁷



Figure 4.30 Lady Gaga performs as Kinney’s white bride in the video “You and I”¹¹⁸

In sum, all three of these white performers protect themselves from the racial costs of “dangerous miscegenies” by invoking and centering hetero-temporalities in both their life and creative stories. It is not their choice of life partners that is important here as much as the way that

these heterosexual, white couplings are presented in contrast to what I am calling “dangerous miscegenies.” In other words, in addition to the narrative foreclosures within the videos of “look but don’t touch,” each of these artists also brackets interracial erotics as temporary, youthful indiscretions. As a set of discursive moves framed in contrast to depictions of cross-racial erotics, their public commitments to upholding the white family coincide with a protection of their privileged role in white patriarchy and the special role of white femininity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter builds off the new feminist discourse discussed in the previous chapter which posits that women can leverage their sexuality and to-be-looked-at-ness as a tool of gender empowerment, rather than a site of oppression. What this chapter examines in particular is the way that Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga develop that to-be-looked-at-ness in relation to black men and other men of color as a kind of titillating “dangerous miscegeny.” This racialized economy of desire between men of color and white women draws on a long history of violent white cultural fantasies about and sanctions against black male desire of white women. This fantasmic relation puts white women in a unique position of exaltation, desirability, potential vulnerability and protection which contemporary female artists in popular culture have leveraged to create a number of feminist empowerment fantasies in an intermixed entanglement of pleasure, danger, and containment. Using film scholar Susan Courtney’s notion that pop cultural depictions of miscegenation provide both the “sanction” and the “limit” for female transgression, this chapter examines both how white racial privilege enables a set of feminist empowerment discourses to emerge, as well as potentially forecloses radical feminist change by securing white female loyalty to a racial hierarchy that provides some racial benefits, but also fixes women in a relatively subordinate position.¹¹⁹

¹ Screenshot. "Ludacris promising all the finer things (photo)." From *Glamorous* Directed by Dave Meyers. Performed by Fergie ft. Ludacris. 2007. Accessed at YouTube/FergieVEVO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0SyUgw98tE&ob=av2e>. (2/24/2012).

- ² Dave Meyers (Dir). *Glamorous*. Performed by Fergie, 2007. Music Video.
- ³ Stacy Ferguson et al., *Glamorous (song performed by Fergie)*, 2006. A&M Records.
- ⁴ Ibid.
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- ¹⁷ Dora Apel, *Imagery of lynching : black men, white women, and the mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: London : Rutgers University Press, 2004), 182.
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CHAPTER 5: EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD: RACE AND FEMINIST FANTASIES OF POWER IN THE MUSIC VIDEOS OF FERGIE, GWEN STEFANI AND LADY GAGA

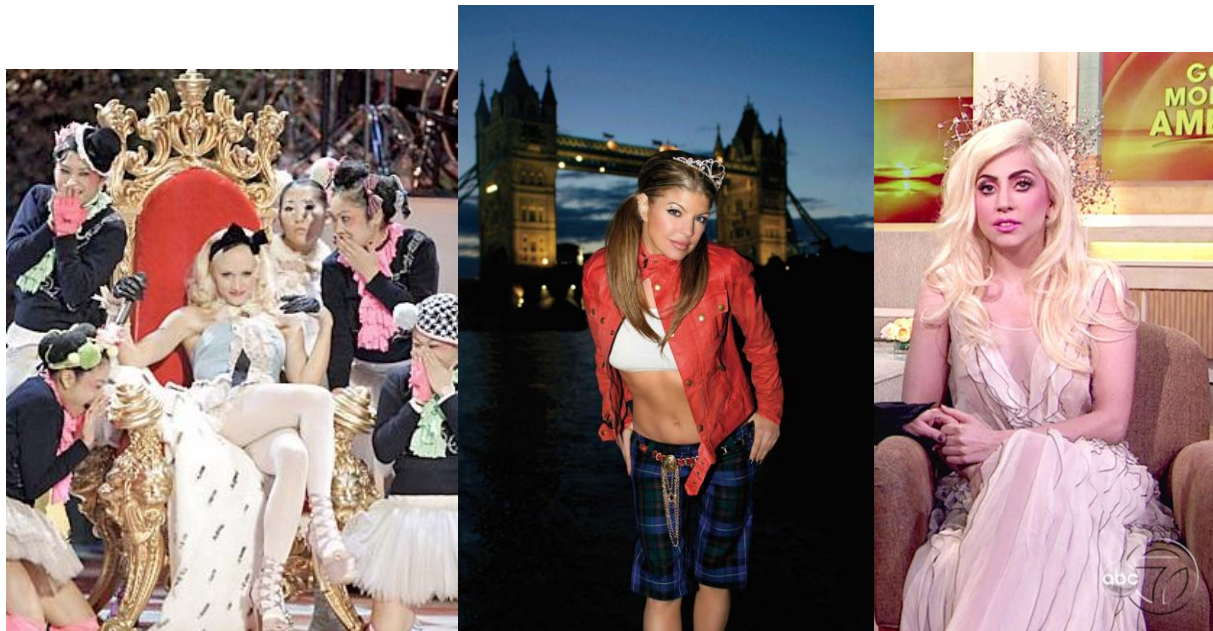


Figure 5.1 The Royalty of Pop: Gwen Stefani on her throne; Fergie with her tiara and Scottish Tartan; Lady Gaga with a crown¹

Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga often pose as royalty, sit in thrones and wear crowns. The title of Fergie's solo album *the Dutchess*, plays on the parallel between her nickname "Fergie" (for Stacy Ferguson) and the British Duchess of York Sarah Ferguson's informal tag. As such she performed on her Dutchess tour wearing a royal cape, crown askew atop her head, and holding a scepter. Lady Gaga sports a whole catalog of queen-like costumes, crowns, thrones, and palanquins, and has even met the Queen of England. And Gwen Stefani poses on the front and back cover of her first solo album "L.A.M.B.," sitting on a throne, a theme she also played-up on tour, surrounded by doting Harajuku Girls. The princess/royalty fantasy is just one of the many feminist *power fantasies* that circulate in popular culture in the contemporary period. Feminist scholars have critiqued what they consider to be 'bad' princess fantasies, such as those of early Disney and fairy tales, because they re-iterate regressive gender expectations such as docility, fixation on beauty and thinness, and

passively waiting to be rescued by a prince.² But other feminist scholars have applauded what seems to be part of a third-wave update in royal representations: tough, witty, and smart princesses who fight when necessary (such as in *Shrek*, *Tangled*, *Princess Diaries*, etc). Naomi Wolf, in an Op-ed for *The New York Times* puts it directly:

If you look closely, the princess archetype is not about passivity and decorativeness: It is about power and the recognition of the true self... What other female role model can issue a sentence and have the world at her feet? What other female figure can command an army, break open a treasury, or even, as in images of Kate Middleton or of Diana Spencer, simply bestow, with her presence, a sense of magic, excitement and healing?³

Although the early princess fantasies might have been regressive, Naomi Wolf argues that feminist mothers should not fret over their young daughters desire to be a princess. Today, she argues, the desire to be a princess is about “female power, assertion and heroism,” or in essence, a young girl’s desire to rule the world.⁴ This chapter looks at this particular aspect of what makes Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga compelling for female audiences: their spectacular displays as women on top — successful women who seem to be in charge of their own, and others, destinies.

In addition to the power fantasy of the princess, feminist scholars of popular culture recognize, and tend to applaud, a range of other displays of “power, achievement, and control” from the kick-ass tough-girl heroines such as Xena and Buffy, to television roles of women in leadership positions, such as bosses, police chiefs, presidents, CEOs, etc.⁵ Feminist debate around these power fantasies in popular culture usually revolves around whether they are “truly” empowering, or whether they represent “real” gender power. For instance, feminists debate over whether these figures are portrayed as too feminine and soft which undermines their authority, or as too “bitchy,” which reflects social backlash against powerful women.⁶ And they debate over whether commodified “Girl Power” translates to economic or social power for women, or whether it satiates women and girls’ will to power through superficial consumption-based power. For instance, communication scholar Susan Douglas worries that the consumption of power fantasies in popular culture might convince women they have achieved much more than they actually have, arguing that

“images of imagined power ... mask, and even erase how much still remains to be done for girls and women [and] make sexism seem fine, even fun”⁷ Additionally, Rebecca Hains finds the conflation of girl power and purchasing power problematic, arguing that “the fetishistic commercial function of girl power undermines true work towards equality, serving corporate interests at the expense of girls' personal interests.”⁸ But regardless of the debate on whether popular culture delivers true gender empowerment, the ideational root of these power fantasies — that women should indeed strive for power, achievement, and control — is generally not in question. In fact, women reaching and successfully participating in the upper echelons of power in society often is the common sense understanding of feminism in the popular imagination.

What I am concerned about in this chapter is the system of power that rarely enters this popular feminist discussion in depth. Specifically, I am referring to differential privileges of race, class and neo-colonial global positioning that grants some women access to social and economic power and authority in ways that could be construed as feminist. Controversial author Naomi Wolf develops these connections in sometimes troublingly overt ways in her theory of “power feminism” when she calls on women to “to demand the full scope of authority” they can in order to take their “share of the *empire* as swiftly ... as possible.”⁹ As a staunch defender of neo-colonial global capitalism, Wolf argues that the goal of power feminism is not to ensure equality *amongst* women, but rather to ensure that inequality is not “based on gender.”¹⁰ In other words, she calls on certain kinds of women, particularly upper-middle-class white Western women to use those privileges of class, race, and nationality to balance out any disadvantages caused by gender. For instance, in the *New York Times* op-ed cited above, Wolf marvels at the way Elizabeth I used, among other accessories, “her whitened complexion” to “send political messages about Britain’s colonial role” and “the legitimacy of her reign.”¹¹ In *Fire with Fire*, Wolf marks her subjects of power feminism through racially coded contrasts as not “illiterate victims of the slave trade in Thailand” but “educated affluent elite of a superpower.”¹² They are not “delinquent young girl gangbangers” but

"women in American mainstream" who listen to "country and western." ¹³ They are not "urban degenerates," but rather her "sister-in-law" and friends, as well as "Midwestern students and hairstylists."¹⁴ Through careful and not-so-careful differentiation between the kinds of women who can and cannot access and benefit from power feminism, Wolf develops a theory of feminist power that looks to empower women through non-gender based axes of supremacy and privilege.

Many academic feminists rightfully shudder at her sometimes reductive and brazen prescription for imperialist feminism. But with regards to race, critics typically focus on the exclusionary nature of her argument, i.e. that Wolf thinks that "white experience could stand for all experience."¹⁵ Instead of examining the way Naomi Wolf's prescription for power feminism is fundamentally enabled by racial privilege, they consider instead, as Astrid Henry did, how "economic and racial privilege enable white, middle-class feminists to solipsistically explore their own identities" and are not forced to consider others.¹⁶ As has been my contention throughout this dissertation, race in this formula is not simply a solipsistic oversight that can be filled in superficially in order to make a more complete story. Instead, racial privilege and inequity, especially as Wolf explicitly uses in her sections on feminist power fantasies, provides integral, and potentially inextricable, foundations for power feminism.

Regardless of a lack of academic consensus around the legitimacy of Naomi Wolf's power feminism, much of what Wolf names and applauds as feminist power fantasies seem to have gained a foothold in popular culture. Specifically, and what this entire project has sought to unveil, racist, classist, and colonialist tropes repeatedly circulate in popular culture in the name of gender empowerment. This chapter is devoted to interrogating the ways that Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga emerge as leaders, on top, and powerful successful women, i.e. feminist icons, particularly through depictions of racial inequities which echo historical positions of power. Naomi Wolf argues that it is particularly important for mainstream women to have access to "narratives, dream images, heroes, heroines, and myths" of women seeking revenge for harms done, wielding

authority, gaining and using wealth, and achieving competitive victories over others.¹⁷ However, the majority of the examples she provides for these power icons involves narratives in which women wield power over others in ways that are supported and structured by racial and imperial hierarchies. A large number of Wolf's cases — a pattern that is echoed in the power fantasies of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga — involve a white woman's empowerment and/or enrichment through her ability to control the labor of or ensure the subservience of others, often people of color. These tend to map in part to fantasies which incorporate 19th century aristocratic roles of power for white women, such as the plantation mistress/colonial household manager, the intendant imperial reformer/savior, and, a seemingly modern spin-off that still traffics in echoes of 19th century sensibilities, the factory owner.

The “Sheba principle:” “Money,” “Worldly Power,” and the Plantation Mistress

The Sheba Principle (and/or the Princess fantasy) is one of Naomi Wolf's key archetypal fantasies for women in power.¹⁸ Wolf exalts the biblical figure — Queen of Sheba — whose “wealth gives her the influence” to be greeted by the king of a neighboring area “with respect and honor.”¹⁹ She identifies this archetype as the principle of “female material power” and what she calls its metaphoric equivalents, a position of authority and honor that it enables.²⁰ Two key examples that she identifies of this principle in popular culture, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Little Princess*, make clear that although Wolf ostensibly argues that she is trying to build a “positive emotional vocabulary about money” for women, she is naming a set of power dynamics which extend far beyond raw economics.²¹ Rather, she gravitates towards celebrating a kind of status and influence over others that could only be explicitly shown through the 19th century's rigid racial and class hierarchies which afforded elite white women and girls authority over subordinates.

In her first example, Wolf identifies *Gone with the Wind* as “the favorite female fantasy of the modern age in the West.”²² She considers Scarlett O'Hara as a prime power feminist icon because she is “vain, sexy, power hungry, and bad, and we adore her.”²³ And Wolf particularly highlights

“Scarlett’s determination to build an empire out of her destitution” and how she “succeeds in rebuilding a world on her own terms and becoming a breadwinner for her dependents” by “expertly” running a lumber mill.²⁴ She is particularly enamored with Scarlett’s economic ambition and her leadership position as head of the household and running a mill, and her rejection of feminine passivity while embracing sexuality —a staple of gaze empowerment.

What Wolf alludes to is the reinforcement of a sense of what she later calls “natural aristocracy” which provides opportunities that allow Scarlett to triumph over gender restrictions.²⁵ Scarlett’s social mobility in this film is enabled primarily through the rigid race and class structure of the South that designates Scarlett a member of the ruling class regardless of the amount of wealth in her possession. Scarlett’s destitution does not apply to social capital, only liquid capital. This point is highlighted in the film through the contrast between Belle, the prostitute who is laden with cash, and the cash-poor gentry, such as Scarlett and others, who, even in their poverty, initially reject her financial contribution to the hospital and are socially scandalized by any perceived connection with her. Scarlett’s “respectability” – a structural designation she acquires more through birth than through her own behavior — allows her to marry (multiple) men with wealth, and call in financial favors and debts to open the lumber mill. Scarlett is vastly successful as the owner of the mill because she ruthlessly exploits prison labor in lieu of slave labor. In one scene, she argues with her friend Ashley Wilkes about the abuse of the prison labor. Scarlett wants to give the overseer a “free hand” on the workers, and Wilkes tries to intervene: “you know what that means. He’ll starve them and whip them. Didn’t you see them? Some are sick, underfed... I will not make money out of the enforced labor and misery of others.”²⁶ Scarlett’s response to Ashley ranges from dismissive “Oh Ashley, how you do run on,” to a counterattack that he wasn’t so “particular about owning slaves” to her final justification of “but have you forgotten what it’s like without money? I found out that money is the most important thing in the world.”²⁷ Wrapped into Wolf’s and many fans of the film’s admiration for Scarlett’s fierce determination to “never go hungry

again,” is a complicity with exploitative relations that ensure others lower on the hierarchy stay perpetually and structurally hungry.

Further, another element that marks Scarlett as powerful in Wolf’s calculation is her ability to command and provide for her “dependents.” In this case, her dependents include a number of black house-slaves who remain loyal to her and at times are portrayed as stupid and incompetent in order to provide a foil against which Scarlett’s moxie and ability can emerge. In short, Scarlett’s powerfulness is made visible, is recognizable, because she has (racialized) ‘subjects’ that serve her and whom she commands.

This last point is particularly highlighted in Wolf’s second example, Francis Hodges Burnett’s *The Little Princess*. The story follows the lead character Sara, the daughter of a wealthy soldier stationed in colonial India, as she is sent to a private boarding school where she is given the best of everything. While the specifics vary across novel, play, and film adaptations, the gist of the story is that Sara is eventually orphaned and left penniless, at which point she is forced to become a maid at the school she was previously attending. In the end, Sara recovers her wealth and status. However, it is the class and racial dynamics in the interim period that enable her to maintain herself as “a little princess” despite her reduced situation, that most interests Wolf for its feminist fantasy potential. Wolf points out, “at the nadir of her poverty and humiliation, Sara still has an adoring maid, even more pathetic than she is, who decides spontaneously to serve her.”²⁸ In the 1995 film adaptation, situated in New York rather than London, the maid Becky is portrayed as a little black girl, thus enabling the social rigidities of class in Britain to translate for an American audience, who understand the social rigidities of race in a similar way.²⁹ In addition to Becky’s doting servitude, Wolf marvels that Sara is “mysteriously provided with an attendant, an obedient (brown-skinned: This is colonial England) adult male, who does her least bidding.”³⁰ Rather than apologize for the race and class politics that subtend this colonial imperial empowerment narrative, Wolf celebrates them as the key to this gender power tale: “Mid-Victorian bourgeois attitudes about colonials [i.e.

race], class, and wealth combine to produce a more overreaching fantasy of power than a modern tale can offer. The ‘natural’ aristocracy of a seven-year-old English girl allows her to exert a benevolent dictatorship over another child lower than herself in the social hierarchy, and over a full-grown manservant.³¹ Thus, although Wolf argues that this particular archetype is aimed at imbuing women with a positive feeling about money, both of these examples exhibit forms of power and aristocracy (built from whiteness and elite social position) that continue to operate even in the absence of money. Wolf’s notion that 19th century race and class attitudes provide a “more overreaching fantasy of power than a modern tale can offer” may also explain the prevalence of similar historical tropes that inform the power fantasies that circulate in the videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. For instance, these performers also present themselves as powerful and ‘in charge’ through depictions of their ability to command and subordinate others. As I will discuss in this section, racialized plantation, household manager of domestic servants, and colonial narratives continue to circulate in their videos. In the next two sections, I unpack two variations of the theme, which includes racialized factory-labor management, and colonial narratives of the white Mother/caretaker, or what Burton calls “the white woman’s burden.”³²

One of the most obvious depictions of the plantation mistress narrative emerges in Fergie’s Shirley Temple persona as it is depicted in “Fergalicious.” In one sequence of the video, Fergie emerges in a Shirley Temple-inspired dress: a polka-dot babydoll dress with ruffles that resembles the dress in Shirley Temple’s movie advertisement for the movie, the *Littlest Rebel*. Fergie’s hair is in Temple-like curls and she is surrounded by candy to highlight a certain girlish erotic. Her producer and fellow Black Eyed Pea, Will.i.am, plays a foil for her Shirley Temple in this video. He is wearing a velvet coat which bears a striking resemblance to the one Bill “Bojangles” Robinson wears as “Uncle Billy” in the *Littlest Rebel* (though the top hat is probably in homage to Willy Wonka which I will discuss in the second section).



Figure 5.2 Comparing Fergie and Will.i.am to Shirley Temple and Bojangles³³

The on-screen relationship between Shirley Temple and Robinson particularly, but also other subservient persons of color is well noted in film historiographies. Donald Bogle, author of the classic *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, says that “Blacks appeared so often in her important films that there was an inside industry joke that a Temple picture was incomplete without at least one darky.”³⁴ Echoing themes I have raised in earlier chapters, cultural theorists have examined the way Shirley Temple is the paradigmatic example of the racially exclusive cultural valorization of white femininity. Specifically, with regards to Temple, they argue that she represents a racially specific notion of “cuteness” as “an aesthetic that mobilizes ... a peculiarly ‘feminine’ proprietary desire ... to care for, cherish, and protect.”³⁵ Further, Toni Morrison uses a Shirley Temple doll as the cultural icon for exposing the racist conflation between whiteness and beauty in the *Bluest Eye*.³⁶ Other scholars have interrogated the tensions of pleasure-danger-containment of the eroticized innocence of Shirley Temple and the containment of the sexual tension of the Bojangles-Shirley Temple dyad.³⁷ All of

these dynamics are also in play in the representational strategies of Fergie as Shirley Temple vis-à-vis Will.i.am. Here, I am particularly interested in underscoring the plantation power fantasies which position a white girl as master and commander of black adults. As Bogle notes, “of all the leading ladies to be waited on by the colored help, none was ever more dutifully attended to than little Miss Curlytop.”³⁸ In the *Littlest Rebel*, Robinson serves as Temple’s loyal servant (slave) and temporary guardian during the Civil War. He tap dances to raise funds for her train ticket to beg a pardon from President Lincoln for her confederate father. As Uncle Billy, Bogle suggests, Robinson portrayed the “perfect – perhaps the quintessential – tom role” as a “well-behaved, mannerly Negro attendant.”³⁹

As producer, and featured artist on Fergie’s solo album, Will.i.am takes a secondary position to support Fergie’s solo venture. As noted in earlier chapters, Will.i.am serves a dual role for Fergie in her videos for “London Bridge” and “Fergalicious.” On the one hand, he provides an approving Black male gaze which legitimates her cross-racial performances as well as highlights or concentrates her desirability through the taboo on black-white looking relations. At the same time, Will.i.am’s loyal companionship as her support staff, and the narratives of Will.i.am’s non-threatening persona that circulates in popular media support the notion that Will.i.am provides a safe Bojangle-like companionship to her Shirley Temple femininity. For example, an article about the Black Eyed Peas argues that their “pan-inoffensiveness” and willingness to be racial and cultural “chameleons” is what secures their mass appeal, from fan-bases around the world to advertisers. “I go to Brazil, they think I’m Brazilian,” Will.i.am tells *Rolling Stone* magazine, “I go to Panama, they think I’m Panamanian because I speak Spanish... Southeast Asia? Apl go! Speak Filipino” and when they are in white northern European countries such as Sweden? “They like Fergie, we’ll put her in front.”⁴⁰ In Will.i.am’s search to secure the broadest fan-base possible, he is willing to adapt culturally and racially to satisfy the identification needs of the particular target audiences. Thus, it is within the realm of reason that Will.i.am participating in a white feminist fantasy scenario where

Fergie gets to command a subordinate and loyal black helpmate is part of a strategic appeal to young white female fans. If the Black Eyed Peas front man taking a backseat to Fergie's stardom offers a feminist appeal, then it is the racial dynamic between Fergie's Shirley Temple white and Will.i.am's Bojangles black that makes the gender reversal culturally legible.

Whereas Will.i.am's subservient role to Fergie is implied through the allusion to Shirley Temple, other aspects of these women's videos, especially Lady Gaga's, make the domestic servant relationship between white mistress of the household and persons of color in service positions much more explicit. For example, in "Paparazzi," Lady Gaga stars as the mistress of a large house. As described in chapter 3, the house is an opulent white marble estate, with white roses, vast gardens, chandeliers, and a grand entry. And, more notable here, staffed with black male butlers in tuxedos with white gloves. Fitting the trope of good domestic servants, the staff is not visible in the earlier intimate scenes between Lady Gaga and her partner played by Alexander Skarsgaard. Yet, after her lover throws her off the balcony and Gaga returns home in a wheelchair and on crutches, she is then surrounded by four black butlers who open her car door, help her into her wheelchair, wheel her in the house, and transition her to crutches – all while dancing of course. The racial dynamics of her support staff does not only echo the historico-economic relations of power which have tended to channel African Americans (and more recently racialized immigrants) into domestic roles for white elites, but in a narrative about paparazzi and the divisions between public and private, Lady Gaga also invokes the image of the domestic confidante that is structured through racial difference. For example, one critic of the video pointed out the entanglement of disability, race, and politics of the public/private sphere division. Feminist disability blogger Anaham argues that although Lady Gaga portrays disability by being in a wheelchair and then on crutches, a potentially positive thing for an extremely underrepresented demographic in popular culture, Lady Gaga hides her disability in the private sphere of her home – reinforcing the idea that disability should not be visible in the public sphere.



Figure 5.3 Lady Gaga's butlers ready to assist⁴¹



Figure 5.4 Lady Gaga looking fabulous with her butlers at attention⁴²

Anaham also points out that this convalescence in the private sphere is possible precisely because of the domestic help of people of color. She writes: “disability can be ‘cool,’ but only if it is temporary, *not* shown to the public, and that your eventual recovery from it can be portrayed through the timeless medium of dance! Oh, and be sure to have people of color around to assist you with your wheelchair and with your ‘recovery’-cum-dance routine.”⁴³ The relegation of disability to a private or secret sphere, especially in the fraught context of paparazzi and public exposure, coupled with her black attendants draws on the racial narrative that black domestics hold secrets

for white folks. As Patricia Hill Collins notes in her article on the “outsider within,” black persons in domestic roles “have long been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society.”⁴⁴ Judith Rollins, in her study on the relationship between black domestic workers and their white employers, argues that this confidante role re-iterates and reflects the perceived social distance between white women and their servants of color. Rollins suggests “employers can feel free to tell domestics secrets they would not share with their friends or family precisely because the domestic is so far from being socially and psychologically significant to the employer.”⁴⁵ As one former domestic tells Rollins: “most employers like to talk to the people who work for them because you're not in their circle, you're not going to tell anybody who's important to them...A white person will go up to a black stranger and tell them very private things - because they know it's not going to go.”⁴⁶ Thus, Lady Gaga surrounding herself with loyal black servants at a time of vulnerability and increased public scrutiny echoes a historical narrative that naturalizes her position as the dominant mistress and employer – the feminist power fantasy — even in a time of need. Racial difference mediates the tension between femininity (vulnerability, desiring to be cared for) on the one hand, and power (being in charge, the boss) on the other.

Lady Gaga also relies on racial difference and subordination to navigate what some consider an ironic critique of 1950s domesticity in the “Let’s Make a Sandwich” sequence in “Telephone.” In this sequence, Lady Gaga riffs off the 1950s short films sponsored by the American Gas Association that teaches women “modern” cooking and housekeeping techniques using the gas stove. In one film, entitled *Let’s Make a Sandwich*, a teenage Sally Gasco (short for Gas Company), makes tuna rarebit sandwiches for unexpected male guests under her mother’s watchful eye.



Figure 5.5 Sally Gasco and her mother make a sandwich.⁴⁷



Figure 5.6 Lady Gaga and her staff make a sandwich.⁴⁸

As the Sally Gasco films revolve around proper housekeeping tips for women based on a 1950s domestic ideal, Lady Gaga's parody of the "Let's make a sandwich" sequence in the midst of a

feminist revenge-murder narrative can be read as a feminist rejection of this restrictive femininity. In many ways, Lady Gaga satirizes vintage style in order to reinvent and explode vintage gender restrictions. In the 2010 update of “Let’s Make a Sandwich,” Lady Gaga replaces the submissive Sally Gasco with herself as the commander-in-chief of a large kitchen staff of men of color, up-ending and re-writing gender stereotypes about passivity and leadership.

Unfortunately, a white woman in charge of a large kitchen staff comprised primarily of persons of color cites an alternative vintage fantasy: that of the plantation or colonial mistress such as in *Gone with the Wind* and *The Little Princess*.



Figure 5.7 Lady Gaga is an equal opportunity employer as her staff includes dancers/workers of Asian-American, Latino and African-American descent⁴⁹

The fact that both of the serving staffs in “Paparazzi” and “Telephone” consist entirely of men rather than women feeds into the premise that the gender-reversal — the depiction of women in power positions over men — is serving as the contemporary alibi or deflection from the historical racial politics of white privilege and the subordinate relationships of non-white domestic workers, even (and often especially) to white women.

Gwen Stefani's relationship to the Harajuku Girls also echoes the colonial/plantation power fantasy. Stefani's Harajuku Girls are perhaps even more troubling than Lady Gaga's narratives of domestic servants because although they don't tend to provide domestic service labor for Gwen, she speaks about them in the language of objectified ownership. For instance, in Stefani's song "Rich Girl," she suggests that if she has enough money, she will "get" some Harajuku Girls that she can name and dress up, like dolls:

*Cause I'd have all the money in the world, if I was a wealthy girl
I'd get me four Harajuku Girls to (uh huh)
Inspire me and they'd come to my rescue
I'd dress them wicked, I'd give them names (yeah)
Love, Angel, Music, Baby⁵⁰*

Combining the narratives of a queen who acquires ladies-in-waiting with the colonial narrative of collecting or acquiring the exotic other, Stefani suggests that her ability to obtain and control four Harajuku Girls in the modern era is a matter of purchasing power.



Figure 5.8 Stefani pantomimes dressing up her Harajuku girl⁵¹



Figure 5.9 Harajuku Girls packaged and sold as actual dolls. Notice Stefani’s photo in bottom right corner wearing a royal crown.⁵²

Although Stefani presents this as a fantasy in the song “Rich Girl,” in reality, Stefani *is* a wealthy girl, who *did* acquire four women of Japanese descent to accompany her in videos and to events, who she *did* rename Love, Angel, Music, and Baby, and who she *does* dress up, often in matching outfits. Stefani’s Harajuku Girls have appeared in at least seven of her videos, serve as her back-up dancers on tour, and walk the red carpet with her. The names, Love, Angel, Music, and Baby coincide with her fashion label *L.A.M.B.*, which is also the title of her first solo album. This naming relationship breaks down the racialized service relationship between Gwen Stefani and the Harajuku Girls even further from one of labor to one of commodity ownership, trafficking in some highly charged racist narratives which dehumanize people of color in relation to white ‘masters.’ Gwen Stefani told interviewer Jonathan Ross that she named her line *L.A.M.B.* after her dog growing up, who she nicknamed “lamb” because she followed Gwen everywhere. “I was Mary, hello!” she told Ross and his audience.⁵³ In the same way, Stefani sets up the Harajuku Girls to follow her everywhere, as her

little lambs, setting her in the dominant role of Mary. Gwen Stefani can invoke the power fantasy of being the followed and adored Mary by using racial grammars to provide for human L.A.M.B.s to validate her authority.

Racialized Labor and the production of the Gendered Celebrity Brand

A second key power fantasy that emerges in the videos of these artists is that of women being the boss, CEO, owner, manager, i.e. the one in charge. For instance, when *Bust* magazine asked Gwen Stefani if she was a feminist, Stefani hesitated, but suggested that if she was one, then her position of power and authority at her company L.A.M.B. is what would identify her as one. She notes, "working with L.A.M.B. and all the people around me, I definitely have been able to see the power of my position."⁵⁴ What is interesting is that these artists often use the metaphor of "the factory," visually and discursively, to depict real and fantasy labor relations that locate them in these positions of authority. Yet the product of these factories tends to be the celebrity brand itself, as in Lady Gaga's *Haus of Gaga* and Fergie's "Fergalicious" factory. Typically, the literature on celebrity branding (and/or the practices of self-branding) tends to differentiate the contemporary brand-focused post-Fordist capitalist era from a factory-based Fordist predecessor. In the North American context, the capitalist impulse has moved to "brands-over-products, marketing-over-making."⁵⁵ As manufacturing is outsourced to the Global South, scholars suggest, North Americans also experience a shift in the cultural relation to capitalism as the modes of labor and relationship to production changes. Rosemary Hennessy notes: "the proliferation of information technologies [and] media images ... in post-industrial cultures has helped to reconfigure bourgeois modes of perception in First World populations, producing subjects who are... less likely to experience capitalism collectively through production relations and more likely to experience it through relations of consumption."⁵⁶ However, although the literature tends to examine the commodification of self-as-brand as a self-reflexive labor practice — one differentiated from the factory production of goods — the videos and meta-discourse of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady

Gaga are chock-full of allusions, fantasies, and depictions of the factory, with their personal brand as the product, and themselves as the manager and owner. And almost always, people of color serve visually as their imaginative and “imaginary” workers.⁵⁷ What I will attempt to show in this section, is that although the Western “modes of perception” may have changed with regards to production and consumption, the recurring racialized factory images invoked by these artists suggests that the displacement of the factory to the Global South has not expunged it from the North American unconscious. Instead, the international division of labor enables factory imagery to merge with historical imperialist fantasies for what Naomi Wolf calls a more overreaching feminist power fantasy. The feminist brand of woman as boss, owner, manager, and ruler is manufactured, visually and discursively, through metaphors of the factory, including its historical and contemporary racial landscape.

The shift from focus on products to focus on brands in post-Fordist capitalism arises, in part, from the need for corporations to differentiate between “functionally identical commodities” in saturated consumer markets or what Robert Walker calls “the Pretty Good Problem.”⁵⁸ Rhetorical critic Christine Harold elaborates: “Global capitalism has so successfully standardized production processes that marketers today are challenged with selling products that are of more or less the same quality and affordability as their competitors.”⁵⁹ This logic of market saturation and the need to differentiate pertains to the precarious labor market as well, as evidenced in the rise of the phenomenon of self-branding or personal branding. Harold continues: “when global economic forces have made it possible for companies to shop globally for affordable talent” self-branding provides an avenue for people to “define oneself in a way that stands out from the rest.”⁶⁰

The celebrity-as-brand may be considered the pinnacle of the self-branding phenomena. As Anthropologist Alison Kooistra argues, when the commodified identity merges with fame, a brand can develop which is “associated not with one particular product... but rather with a constellation of values, lifestyle and image.”⁶¹ Using Naomi Klein’s example of rapper 50 Cent, Kooistra illustrates

how the celebrity brand extends beyond the original product of music. In addition to being a rapper, 50 Cent is also associated with starting his own record label, clothing line, products such as vitamin water, acting and directing, and so on. “Self-branding” when merged with celebrity, “can result in incredible profit empires.”⁶² Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga are no exception to this celebrity-as-brand phenomena. Like 50 Cent, Gwen Stefani not only has her own product labels (L.A.M.B. and Harajuku Lovers) which brand a range of products from clothing to dolls to cameras, but she also has done movie roles, product advertisements, etc. Fergie has her own line of shoes, a fragrance, product sponsorships, video games, as well as acting credits. Lady Gaga is an excellent example of a brand for brands’ sake. The products of the Lady Gaga brand are almost entirely representation-based – music, videos that are also little movies, television specials, and general fashion iconicity. She ties product placement into her representations, and is linked to non-tangible products such as special release items in social networking games on Facebook. Her product, in short, is the brand “Gaga,” which she builds not only through her music, but her performance art, interviews, public appearances. Lady Gaga illustrates the claim that “a brand is also a value-generating form or property in its own right.”⁶³

In the Post-Fordist shift to “marketing-over-making,” discussions about labor and work in self-branding has also shifted to examining a what analysts call a “distinct kind of labour:” the creative work of self-branding requires self-reflexivity, the exploration of the self, and the notion of putting one’s subjectivity to work.⁶⁴ For example, Christine Harold’s review of self-branding manuals suggests that developing a personal brand involves a kind of self-help affective work, from understanding one’s own passions, to developing the properly adaptive attitudes towards the precariousness of contemporary employment.⁶⁵ Others argue that the creative process of self-branding “demands that the worker put his own life experience, communicative competency, and sense of self into the job.”⁶⁶ This kind of creative work in the neo-liberal context is often depicted as individualized, so that the hierarchical relations of labor in capital, such as owner-manager-worker

tends to fall out of contemporary labor equation as anachronistic. Instead, self-branding guru Tom Peters suggests “we are CEOs of our own companies, Me, Inc.”⁶⁷ This neoliberal flattening is reinforced by the tendency of late capital to reduce employees to contract or temporary workers, or, more euphemistically, employee entrepreneurs.

However, although the notion of everyone as an entrepreneur and their own CEO could be seen to reflect a popular empowerment narrative — though scholars debate as to whether or not that empowerment discourse is operational or merely an ideological ruse — the aspirational celebrity brand tends to project a slightly different labor relation: the CEO and manager of others. The celebrity, through their brand, now has the potential to become CEO of actual companies, record labels, fashion lines, etc. And this is where the power feminist potential lies. Wolf notes that the real appeal of certain female celebrities is their position of power, financially and authoritatively: “pop heroines including singer Madonna [while] admired for their performing talent, their appeal to women really took off when they formed their own production companies, negotiated \$60 million dollar deals and directed their own movies.”⁶⁸ In short, a major thrust of the power feminist celebrity brand is to show authority, financial achievement, and rising to the top, not only of the pop charts, but the pop *industry*.

So, on the one hand, these artists operate within a Post-Fordist brand economy that tends to flatten or sublimate hierarchical labor relations in favor of neo-liberal, intensely individualistic discourses of work and brand. But on the other hand, there is an appetite for depictions of women in positions of authority over others, as managers, bosses, owners and directors. These two cultural threads come together in the videos and discourses of these artists in a specific configuration: they self-consciously depict the construction of the brand as a laboring process, but they demonstrate that the labor is conducted by others, with themselves as the manager or sovereign of the brand (as well as ultimate subject).

Hearn argues that self-branding is “an outer-directed process” that actually calls attention to its constructedness. For instance, she argues that in the corporate environment, the branded self is both “a body that works” as well as a body that “points to itself working, striving to embody the values” of the brand or the corporate environment.⁶⁹ Similar to the personal brand, the celebrity brand is one always under construction, and one that calls out its own production. Whereas Gwen Stefani tends to package herself under the brand L.A.M.B. (which she ties to her music, product labels, and Harajuku entourage), Fergie and Lady Gaga much more often consciously produce their own names (or nicknames rather) as brand by referring to themselves in the third person, and defining that name. For instance, Fergie’s songs “London Bridge” and “Fergalicious” can both be read as song-length brand definitions. In “London Bridge,” Fergie introduces herself in the beginning “It’s me, Fergie” followed by a song about what that means – sexy, irreverent, rebellious, strong, “such a lady, but dancing like a ho.”⁷⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, “Fergalicious” is a song whereby Fergie combines her (brand) name with the term delicious to construct herself as desirable. She directly refers to her name “Fergie” and explicitly defines “Fergalicious” in a move to establish the brand of Fergie. The fan does not have to deduce Fergie’s qualities from her behaviors and lyrics, she explicitly and self-referentially defines the brand Fergie:

*Fergalicious definition:
 Make them boys go crazy
 They always claim they know me
 Comin' to me call me Stacy
 (Hey Stacy)*

*I'm the F to the E, R, G, the I, the E
 And can't no other lady put it down like me⁷¹*

In these few lines, Fergie re-emphasizes her persona/brand Fergie by differentiating it from herself as the person named Stacy Ferguson, and then adds descriptions as to what that brand Fergie means: “make them boys go crazy” and “can’t no other lady put it down like me.”

Lady Gaga also continuously defines the brand “Lady Gaga” or “Gaga” in interviews and performances. For instance, when her interviews ask what to call her – for instance, French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier asked if he should call her Stefani during her television special – she immediately says “Gaga, call me Gaga or Lady Gaga.” This is not just a naming preference, she argues, but because Gaga stands for the bigger project (brand) she embodies: “Lady Gaga or Gaga is fine. Everyone calls me one of the two... I think it’s mostly about being in my world and understanding what I do...When you’re around me and really see that all I do is live and breathe for my work, it’s not strange, it’s just Gaga.”⁷² In addition, Lady Gaga often refers to herself in third person, further solidifying the brand. When a *New York Times* interviewer asked her if it was a bit “creepy” to refer to herself in third person, Lady Gaga replied “No. Not if you’re an artist, it’s not. I talk about myself in the third person all the time. I don’t live my life in the way someone like you does. I live my life completely serving only my work and my fans.”⁷³ The Lady Gaga brand is not only her art, but a self-conscious production of fame, the process of which is being re-defined in the “book of Gaga.”⁷⁴ More so than perhaps any other artist, Lady Gaga is not only successfully famous, but is self-reflexive and explicit about the process of that mastery. She tells Anderson Cooper in a *60 Minutes* special that “one of my greatest artworks is the art of fame,” telling him that she’s a “true academic when it comes to music... my style, my fashion.” She uses other terms like mastering the “sociology of fame” or “art directing every moment of my life.”⁷⁵ These phrases represent quintessentially what Hearn describes as not only a body that works, but a body that shows itself working. Not only is Lady Gaga a famous artist, but she shows herself as the artist producing that fame.

What I am most interested in for this chapter is showing that at the level of celebrity, Lady Gaga, Fergie and Gwen Stefani’s brand production (and the display of that production) is not only a self-made project. In line with the feminist power fantasy, these artists show the production of their brands as employing a vast array of laborers to help produce, turning them from artists, to what

other scholars have described of Andy Warhol: *artist-managers*.⁷⁶ In fact, Lady Gaga has been quite explicit about the inspiration she draws from Andy Warhol's Factory, for her own "Haus of Gaga." The Haus of Gaga is an ever-changing set of designers, dancers, musicians, artists, and so on that all participate in the construction of "Gaga." The narration for "Gaga by Gaultier" says that Lady Gaga's life-as-an-art-project is imagined "with a very special team: to express her artistic universe the star had the idea of being surrounded by a team of creators who constantly work for her — the Haus of Gaga. Their mission is to propose ideas, concepts, visuals which Gaga can then select and incarnate."⁷⁷ Lady Gaga describes this team as "my Warholian factory," after Andy Warhol's artistic collective of the 1960s.⁷⁸

"The Factory" is what Andy Warhol called a series of artist studios in the 1960s (the first one being in a building previously occupied by a hat factory) where he mass-produced his paintings and films through silk-screening, using a menagerie of artist-workers. John Cale of the Velvet Underground said in an interview, "it wasn't called the Factory for nothing. It was where the assembly line for the silkscreens happened. While one person was making a silkscreen, somebody else would be filming a screen test."⁷⁹ The mechanization of Andy Warhol's art through a silkscreen "assembly line" has been considered academically from a number of angles. From Warhol's own perspective, mechanizing the reproduction of art enabled him to mass-produce his art, which he considered essential to democratizing access to art: "Factory is as good a name as any. A factory is where you build things... In my art work, hand painting would take much too long and anyway that's not the age we live in. Mechanical means are today, and using them I can get more art to more people. Art should be for everyone."⁸⁰ In addition to mass-producing art, others have noted the way that Warhol's factory meant collaborating with other artists, which "shattered" the pre-war notion of the artist as "solitary master," turning the studio instead into a "potential site of collective and democratic practice."⁸¹ In some ways, this second notion is how Gaga envisions her Haus of Gaga, as

she describes: "My dream was to always have all my friends around and be able to create for each other, with each other and really empower their creativity and they empower mine."⁸²

Yet, there is a third angle here — that of the factory as a site of labor relations — which should be unpacked. Art Historian Roberts notes that the "solitary master" of art is displaced by a "diffuse range of worker/management artistic identities."⁸³ Warhol himself famously suggested that his grand aspiration was to be an "Art Businessman" or a "Business Artist" since "being good in Business is the most fascinating kind of art."⁸⁴ But as Warhol's brand grew in fame and value, the relationship between Warhol as manager and the art-workers as a mostly voluntary "staff" became a site of contention.⁸⁵ Many of the artists who participated at the factory were unpaid, working for board and "occasional meals."⁸⁶ Although Warhol did use the money from his paintings to support his friends at the collective, the distribution of wealth was by his discretion. Roberts notes, "this fluidity in the division of labour became, in fact, an increasing source of grievance as his assistants and his collaborators came to feel exploited."⁸⁷

While surely Lady Gaga's collaborators are well-paid for their services, what is retained in this analogy is the sense that Lady Gaga benefits from the art-factory-labor on a dual level: First, she plays the role of the manager-artist over these worker-artists which extends her power feminist persona, and second, the product of her workers is the creative brand of Gaga herself, which she ultimately owns by virtue of being the branded subject being produced. Although history has unveiled the names of many of the participants of the Warholian factory, at the time, many of the artists were anonymous, sublimated under "Andy Warhol Enterprises." Similarly, few of Lady Gaga's Haus of Gaga collaborators are explicitly named during interviews or even in credits for videos. For instance, Lady Gaga credits the direction of the video "Judas" to the "Haus of Gaga" without explicitly naming the contributors, although later, her choreographer Laurieann Gibson and creative director Nicola Formichetti are credited.⁸⁸

Investigation into the participants of the Haus of Gaga reveals that the majority of the artist-workers, or at least the most visible ones, are a highly diverse cast of people of color. For instance, her creative director Nicola Formichetti is Japanese-born (of mixed Japanese/Italian heritage), while her former and current lead choreographers, Laurieann Gibson and Richy Jackson, are both African American. As noted in chapters three and four, the majority of her background dancers are men and women of color, including Mark Tanemura (from *So You Think You Can Dance*, Season 4), from Hawaii of mixed Japanese, Samoan, and European descent, and Peruvian born Victor Rojas. Her back-up band is also almost entirely people of color, including guitarists Kareem Devlin of ambiguous racial composition and Ricky Tillo, a Canadian of Filipino descent.

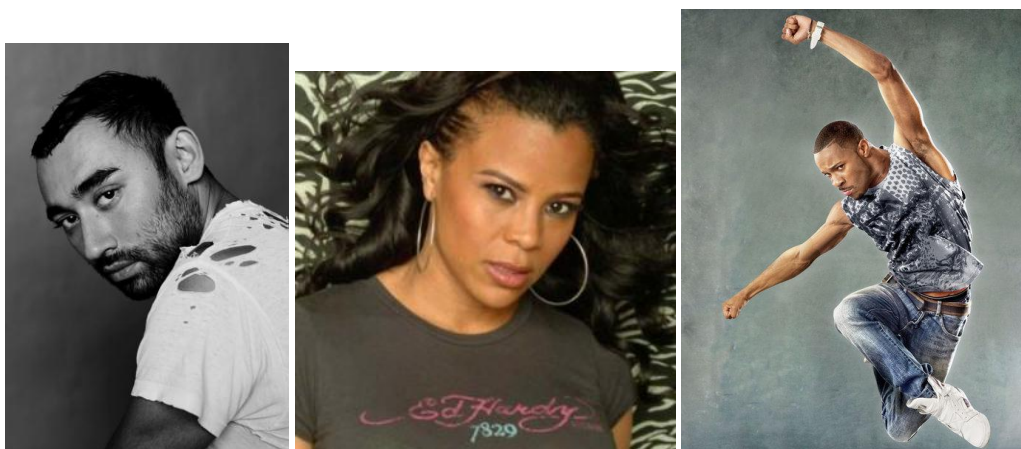


Figure 5.10 *Haus of Gaga*: Nicola Formichetti, Laurieann Gibson, and Richy Jackson⁸⁹

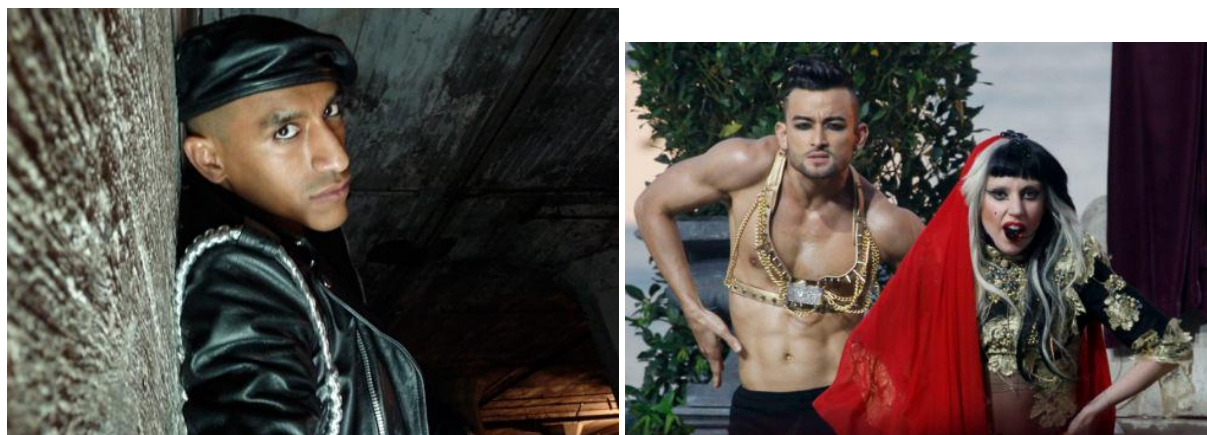


Figure 5.11 Lady Gaga's Dancers, Victor Rojas and Mark Kannemura (pictured with Lady Gaga)⁹⁰



Figure 5.12 Guitarists Kareem Devlin (pictured with Lady Gaga) and Ricky Tillo⁹¹

Within the discourse of Lady Gaga’s Haus of Gaga, it may be hard to unequivocally argue that the inclusion of primarily persons of color is *inherent* to her factory structure. What I would like to suggest here, and expand in the discussion of Fergie’s factory, is that the use of people of color within a white woman’s power fantasy “makes sense” in the dominant cultural unconscious. First, because of the historical power relations between white women and people of color, both domestically and in the colonial context discussed in the previous section, there is not only a more satisfying power fantasy, but there is built in the cultural historical memory a notion that white female authority is naturalized within the racial hierarchy. Race has historically served as the enabling construct for white women to overcome their gender socialization against authority and power. Second, the contemporary global division of labor is shifting the cultural purview of factory work from the unionized blue collar white male auto worker to Chinese factory laborers at Apple’s Foxconn factory and Somalian immigrants at the Tyson plant in Tennessee.⁹² As Gayatri Spivak suggests, sweatshop workers both in and beyond the U.S. demonstrate that “hi-tech postfordism is

supported ... by [global/racial] labor practices that would fit right into old-style industrial capitalism.”⁹³ Thus, historical relations of power collude with contemporary global labor practices in ways that make this feminist power fantasy of the racialized brand-factory “make sense.”

This collusion is even more explicit in Fergie’s homage to Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in her video for “Fergalicious.” At the beginning of the video, assembly line workers construct what look like boxes of candy, in pretty wrapping, labeled “Fergalicious.” The workers on the assembly line are identically-dressed, identically-styled Asian women. The boxes of candy are directly linked to Fergie in a later scene, when she stands behind a tower of Fergalicious boxes that her entourage all scramble for and take away, visually conflating Fergie with the product/brand Fergalicious. The video then cuts to a Willy Wonka-styled set labeled “Fergieland” that is full of a wide cast of characters in various stylistic citations to Willy Wonka and the cartoonish oompa-loompas in both the movies derived from Roald Dahl’s 1964 novel, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005).⁹⁴ As part of a colorful-candy background, Fergie is flanked by four krump dancers in colorful body paint, one of which says “Trix” like the children’s cereal. In addition, she has oddly painted characters scattered throughout the scene, including Tommy the Clown, a street dancer whose style is related to krumping, and a scary clown-type figure with orange face paint like the Oompa Loompas in the 1971 film and hair like Willy Wonka in the 2005 version. There is also Will.i.am dressed as Willy Wonka (hybridized with Bojangles, as discussed above). And there are four identically dressed black men in striped socks and sleeves in an urban play on the Oompa Loompa costume. In addition to their outfits, they do synchronized dances throughout the videos reminiscent of the synchronized Oompa Loompa dances in the 1971 version of the film. In full circle of cultural referents, Fergie’s Willy Wonka references were satirized in the 2007 parody movie *Epic Movie* which spoofed the 2005 film by depicting the Oompa Loompas dancing to *Fergalicious*.

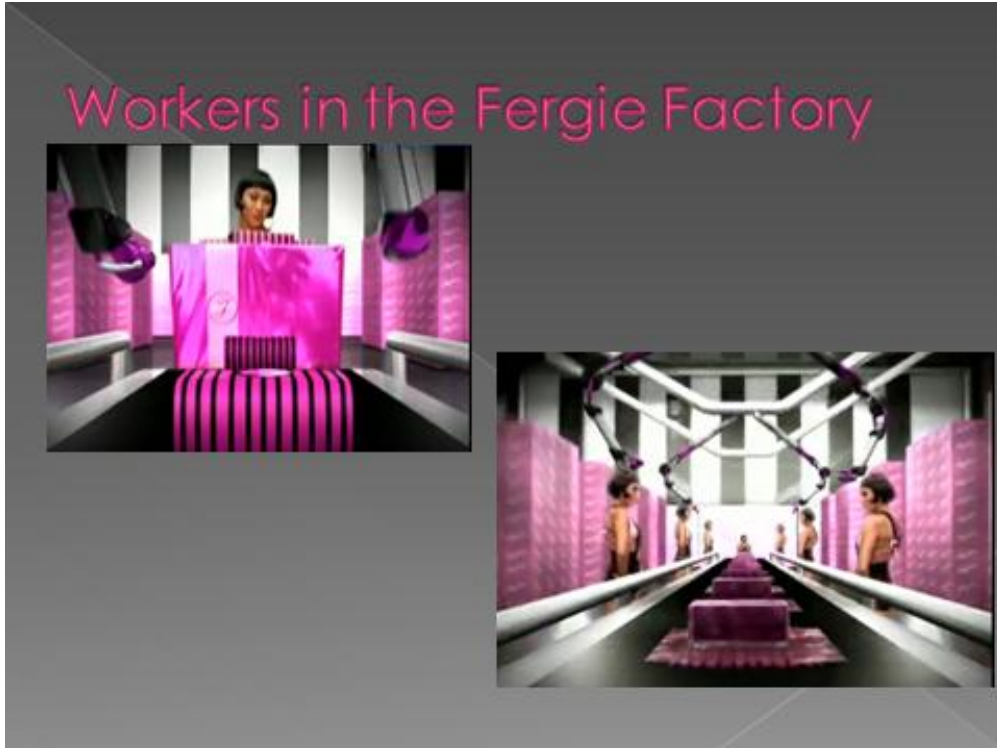


Figure 5.13 Fergie's production line is staffed by identically stylized Asian women (also in suspenders like Oompa Loompa outfit)⁹⁵



Figure 5.14 Fergie conflates herself with the Fergalicious product in visual self-branding⁹⁶



Figure 5.15 Oompa Loompas from the 1971 film *Willy Wonka* and their stylistic citations in “Fergalicious”⁹⁷

If the factory is dedicated to the production of Fergaliciousness, then all the characters in the video could be considered as workers in the Fergieland factory, like the Oompa Loompas in Roald Dahl’s novel and the subsequent films. Significantly, with the exception of one or two painted characters, everyone else in the video is distinctively non-white.

Although the film versions tend to depict Oompa Loompas as orange-faced Little People, the racial connotation of the Oompa Loompas is much clearer in the original novel. Roald Dahl, was a colonial officer in Africa before he wrote the novel. Dahl describes the workers of the chocolate factory as a tribe of tiny long-haired men who the children can scarcely believe are real people. He calls them Oompa Loompas from Loompland, but the parallels to Africa and the imperialist fantasy emerge in his descriptions. In the story, the entire tribe is rescued by Willy Wonka from their “terrible country” where they were starving in a tree-house village and unable to protect

themselves in a land with “nothing but thick jungles infested by the most dangerous beasts in the entire world.”⁹⁸ Wonka’s characterization of their immigration and suitability for factory work is saturated by racial and imperial discourses around immigration, labor, and even the slave trade: “So I shipped them all over here, every man, woman and child in the Oompa-loompa tribe. It was easy. I smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them, and they all got here safely. They are wonderful workers. They all speak English now. They love dancing and music. They are always making up songs.”⁹⁹ In the book and subsequent film narratives, the Oompa-Loompas are hard workers, grateful to their boss and savior for feeding and protecting them in exchange for their loyalty. Postcolonial literary scholar Clare Bradford describes *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as a paradigm of imperial legacies that emerge in postcolonial nostalgic literature. She argues that “Dahl’s treatment of the Oompa-Loompas exactly conforms with Edward Said’s description of the ways in which the West has rationalized colonial processes with claims that colonized people were ‘provided with order and a kind of stability that they haven’t been able . . . to provide for themselves.’”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Dahl is rehearsing an imperial rescue narrative that not only echoes historical justifications for imperialism, but translates to the contemporary exploitation of racialized postcolonial laborers through “the displacement of colonized people and their mass transportation to the imperial center, to be commodified as cheap labor.”¹⁰¹ This functions concurrently with racial narratives that render the Oompa Loompas as “homogenized and robbed of individuality, they exist as a discursive figure, ‘them’ as distinct from ‘us.’”¹⁰²

Echoing this narrative of homogenized (shown through stylistic symmetry) and grateful racialized employee (magnified through the Shirley Temple-Bojangle narrative), Fergie constructs a creative factory which figures her as both the product – and thus direct beneficiary of their symbolic labor – as well as the factory boss-owner, which empowers her through the feminist power fantasy. Fergie is both the object and the dominant subject of the symbolic factory, produced as delicious but also as powerful, able to command a vast menagerie of creative laborers. Perhaps a

happy accident for Lady Gaga, but definitely integral for Fergie, once again, race becomes the enabling vehicle for this gender-power fantasy — owning the factory production of the self-brand.

Colonial Savior/Great White Mother

The last racialized feminist power trope that I will discuss in this chapter is that of the “Great White Mother” or when white women assume positions of superiority over infantilized Others, particularly people of color as a form of what Spivak calls “Imperial Axiomatics.”¹⁰³ Motherhood has been a contested site in contemporary feminist politics, and not necessarily an obvious location for power feminist fantasies from a gender-only perspective. For instance, second wave feminists such as Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone argued that motherhood constitutes a prison of “domestic drudgery” for women, and one that women needed to be able to escape in order to achieve liberation.¹⁰⁴ However, within the racial/imperial context of first wave feminism, white women were able to leverage their racial position as the mothers of not only the white race, but as the perceived caretakers of civilization and mothers of empire, in order to expand their role in public life. In both Britain and the U.S., suffragettes often strategically used the social Darwinian rhetoric of development to participate in the construction of non-white colonized peoples as evolutionarily backward and thus in need of instruction, protection, and care from the more advanced West.¹⁰⁵ As literary scholar Elizabeth Gagen notes: “one of the most common observations in literature about colonial relations has been that indigenous populations are invariably cast as childlike in their nature. ... Historically, such policies allowed colonisers to infantilize native populations, justified a range of paternalistic policies and surveillance strategies and legitimated the exploitation of native economies.”¹⁰⁶ Whereas Gagen highlights that this process of infantilization gave rise to a range of “*paternalistic*” practices, historian Antoinette Burton documents how it also makes a space for imperial *maternalism*, granting missionary-focused white women a specifically gendered position of power within the project of empire building: “Woman as savior of the nation, the race, and the empire was a common theme in female

emancipation arguments."¹⁰⁷ This theme was dependent, Burton argues, on the construction of a "colonialized female Other on whose passivity and disenfranchisement [white women's] claims for imperial representation largely relied."¹⁰⁸ Thus, the social Darwinian discourse which enabled imperialists to infantilize colonial subjects in order to justify continued exploitation, also created an opening for women to leverage social gender roles of mothering, to assume a position of authority within a imperial rescue/civilizing/caretaking narrative.

Communication scholar Katherine Bell makes the case that the discourse of the Imperial Mother/White Colonial Savior continues to circulate in modern popular culture under the banner of celebrity philanthropy. She examines imperial maternalism particularly in the projects of Madonna and Angelina Jolie, both of whom have adopted children from Africa and other locales, as well as serve as celebrity spokespersons for Western based aid-programs in these countries. She suggests, "This historical ideal of colonial women as civilized mothers and keepers of the race, tasked with teaching colonized women about childrearing, is a trope that lives on in the contemporary Western milieu of celebritized parenting."¹⁰⁹ Bell also points out the polysemous potential of the name of Madonna's charity "Raising Malawi" which she says could apply to both "a mission to lift up a poor nation," as well as a mission "to raise its children" (potentially through adopting them one-by-one).¹¹⁰ The conflation between raising children and general national upliftment also implies Madonna is raising (i.e. Mothering) the entire nation, reiterating the colonial infantilization and "characterization of Africans as childlike, in need of rearing and salvation."¹¹¹ The white mother/colonial savior metaphor and infantilization of persons of color haunts the pop cultural texts of the artists of this study as well, particularly in Stefani's relationship to the Harajuku "girls," and Lady Gaga's "mother monster" rhetoric and extended birthing scenario of the video "Born This Way."

Gwen Stefani's use of an entourage of Japanese and Japanese-American background dancers whom she calls the Harajuku Girls has attracted criticism on a number of levels, both within this

dissertation and from others, most famously Margaret Cho's critique of the "Japanese schoolgirl" stereotype as a form of minstrelsy.¹¹² Others have pointed out the mix of Asian racial stereotypes in that "Gwen's Harajuku Girls were silent, infantilized — one of them has even been given the stage name Baby — and sexy all at once. And the clothing brand reinforced these qualities, offering stacked pink wedges side by side with ice-cream-cone-print travel bags."¹¹³ Also, whereas L.A.M.B. is the name of Stefani's upscale brand dedicated to adult fashion, Stefani's less expensive children and baby clothing line is named "Harajuku Lovers" making a parallel between children and her (adult) non-speaking Japanese school-girl styled entourage. Some fashion critics have noted that the Harajuku style that Stefani appropriates is already self-infantalizing, particularly in its incarnations of "Gothic Lolita" and "Kawaii-style." According to a site dedicated to Japanese-based Harajuku style, Kawaii style "generally related to someone wearing clothing that appears to be made for young children or clothes that accentuates the cuteness of the individual wearing the clothing. Ruffles and pastel or bright colors may be worn, and accessories often include oversize toys or bags featuring anime characters."¹¹⁴



Figure 5.16 Kawaii (cute) style and Gothic Lolita¹¹⁵

The development of the Harajuku fashion scene, including Kawaii and Gothic Lolita styles in Japan reflects a complex cultural history of gender negotiations, Japanese cultural history, and globalized cultural encounters, including British trade and post-World War II U.S. Occupation. The

performance of these styles by Japanese women in Japan, however, has a different cultural history and context than when Stefani imports not only the look, but obtains Japanese and Japanese-American women to portray this look as a backdrop for her white femininity. Her performance of the song “Harajuku Girls” on tour is a prime example of the ways this relationship echoes the imperial narrative. At the beginning of the live performance of “Harajuku Girls”, the stage is closed with a curtain, while “Harajuku Lovers” is flashed at the bottom and the name “Gwen Stefani” is flashed across the curtain above it. In the background, traditional Japanese music plays, alerting the audience that she has traveled to an exotic locale. Slowly, a throne rises from the ground, with four identically dressed Japanese women in a Lolita-variation of Catholic school-girl uniforms posed around the throne. When the lights come up, we see Gwen Stefani standing in front of the throne wearing a cape and a crown, and holding a scepter. To emphasize the imperial nostalgia, she is wearing a Victorian-inspired outfit. The color contrast of her hair and clothing, her height, her singularity, and her royalty all emphasize a differentiation between her and the Harajuku Girls, who then step forward to attend to her as she hands off her scepter and robe so she can perform.



Figure 5.17 Stefani invokes both the royal fantasy as well as imperial travel narrative in “Harajuku Girls Live.”¹¹⁶

The lyrics of the “Harajuku Girls” song repeats that she loves their style and is their biggest fan:

*Harajuku Girls you got the wicked style
I like the way that you are, I am your biggest fan¹⁷*

And she elaborates on their creativity:

*Your underground culture, visual grammar
The language of your clothing is something to encounter
A Ping-Pong match between eastern and western*

While the song appears to be a celebration of Harajuku culture, there are a number of ways she asserts her dominance both visually and lyrically. First and foremost, by detailing their fashion and her appraisal of it, she reasserts the colonial gaze and re-emphasizes the narrative that she, a Western woman, is the ultimate arbiter of “coolness” and style:

*Harajuku Girls , I'm looking at you girls
You're so original girls [...]
You mix and match it girls
You dress so fly and just parade around*

This colonial gaze is emphasized visually during the performance when Stefani, as the Victorian Queen, parades across the stage in full light while the Harajuku Girls remain in the background. As she says “I’m looking at you girls” they strike poses for her gaze, and then bow in gratitude after her appraisal is complete.

There are also places in the song in which Stefani’s lyrics turn from appraisal to imperatives. She commands the Harajuku Girls to design and display:

*Work it, express it, live it, command your style
Create it, design it
Now let me see you work it
Create it, design it
Now let me see you work it*

Visually, in the performance, during these lyrics, the Harajuku Girls are frozen in a tableau, until Stefani taps them on each command. “Work it,” she says as she taps the first one, who then begins to dance around. “Express it” she orders the second, and so on. Using these positive directives, Stefani

updates the imperialist savior discourse with a modern empowerment message. But the positioning of Stefani as authoritative and superior continues as before.

Finally, Stefani asserts her power over the Harajuku Girls by not only bragging that she appropriated their style for her own clothing line, but assuming they will be grateful to be able to purchase her interpretations.

*Did you see your inspiration in my latest collection?
Just wait 'til you get your little hands on L.A.M.B.,
'Cause it's (super kawaii), that means (super cute in Japanese)*

By using the phrase “get your little hands on L.A.M.B.” Stefani emphasizes not only her power, but their infantilization, and need of Western intervention and guidance.

By juxtaposing images of Victorian royalty with a range of discursive strategies to emphasize her authority using the imperial tropes of the colonial gaze and philanthropic rescue narrative, Stefani carves out a position of power for herself as a white woman by infantilizing a non-white Other as being in need of her appraisal and intervention. The maternal overtones of this imperial trope are even more evident in her video “Wind It Up” which uses song phrases and visuals from the film, the *Sound of Music*.¹¹⁸ In the video, Stefani is positioned as Maria, while the Harajuku Girls and four non-white male dancers are figured as the Von Trapp children.



Figure 5.18 Through school uniforms and matching “curtain” outfits, Stefani positions the Harajuku Girls and male back-up dancers as the Von Trapp children¹¹⁹

In the video, Stefani again positions herself in the authoritative position with persons of color, particularly, the Harajuku Girls and Stefani's male back-up dancers, configured as the Von Trapp children. In an early scene, the dancers are dressed in school uniforms with Stefani positioned as a nun. They line up according to her directive. She even winds one of the Harajuku Girls up with a giant key as if she is a doll or wind-up toy.



Figure 5.19 This frame depicts two forms of parental authority. On left, Stefani is presented as the the nurturing advice-giver in which she paternalistically instructs “You’ve got to let the beat, under your skin.” On the right, she is depicted as the Dominatrix who instructs “Wind it Up!”¹²⁰

Later scenes depict the authority of Stefani more softly, as Maria giving advice to the Von Trapp children huddled around her. They also show her sewing Stefani branded curtains into matching outfits for the “children,” harking back to the lyrics of “Rich Girl,” in which she said she wanted to dress up her Harajuku Girls. The depiction of the Harajuku Girls in blond wigs not only reinforces the familial metaphor, but it also reflects the imperial civilizing mission in that Stefani makes-over the Harajuku Girls in her own image, i.e. as a reflection of Western glamour.

Lady Gaga has tied the notions of global mother, philanthropy, and empowerment together through her use of the moniker “Mother Monster” to describe herself and the relationship to her fans, “Little Monsters.” From the start, Lady Gaga has been admired for her nurturing concern for her fans, and telling fans that “I want you to walk out of here tonight not loving me more, but loving

yourselves more.”¹²¹ As a hero to her young fans who often feel marginalized, and a champion for LGBT issues, Lady Gaga has not shied away from presenting herself as the philanthropic mother/savior who uses her celebrity to intervene in the lives of young people who need her vision. She has recently started a foundation in partnership with her mother called the Born This Way Foundation which focuses on “Creating a safe place to celebrate individuality” in order to create a “braver, kinder world.”¹²² Although this foundation does not present visually the obvious racial disparities as say, Madonna’s Raising Malawi campaign, it does echo the imperial ideology of social darwinism which posits the white mother (Mother Monster) at the pinnacle of civilization and the beneficiaries of her reform zeal (Little Monsters) as her children.

The Mother Monster narrative does rub up against race more explicitly in the lyrics and video for “Born This Way,” as already noted in places throughout this dissertation. The “Born This Way” video opens with a spoken-word introduction by Lady Gaga referred to as the “Mother Monster Manifesto.” In it, she describes an infinite, eternal mother who begat and “began the beginning of the new race: a race within the race of humanity, a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment, but boundless freedom.”¹²³ In the video, she depicts herself as that universal mother who is able to intervene in the world and bring about this new race of freedom and tolerance.



Figure 5.20 Lady Gaga graphically depicted as Mother Monster, giving birth to tolerance and freedom¹²⁴

Lady Gaga also conflates the philanthropic mother with a queen, depicting her on a crystal throne. Later, she walks through a sea of her disciples, all frozen and bowing at her feet until she begins to dance and they follow her lead.



Figure 5.21 Lady Gaga as the queen of the monsters, who await her command.¹²⁵

As examined in some detail in earlier sections, the visual depiction of Lady Gaga's followers in this and other videos is a highly diverse, mostly non-white cast of background dancers. And, as noted in the earlier chapters, the lyrics of the song explicitly name a vast range of constituencies of her benevolence, including racial and ethnic categories:

*Don't be a drag, just be a queen [gender/sexuality]
Whether you're broke or evergreen [class]
You're black, white, beige, chola descent [race/ethnicity]
You're lebanese, you're orient [nationality]*

*Whether life's disabilities [disability]
Left you outcast, bullied or teased
Rejoice and love yourself today*

*No matter gay, straight, or bi [sexuality]
Lesbian, transgendered life...¹²⁶*

As a caring and concerned Mother Monster, Lady Gaga simplifies and collapses a range of structural and representational marginalities into a single neo-liberal identity marked by self-empowerment

and individual expression. Similar to how the white female imperial reformers exported British bourgeois notions of child-rearing and domesticity across the global empire, Lady Gaga “solves” issues of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, and sexuality through a privileged ideology of individualism and self-esteem. And, like Gwen Stefani in both the videos discussed in this section, Lady Gaga uses the imperative tense prolifically in the lyrics to dispense advice and commands to her followers. “Listen to me” she says.¹²⁷

Chapter Summary

Taken collectively, an examination of the historical citations, imperial invocations, and racial structuring of power circulating in contemporary discourses of pop culture feminism reveal a pattern of feminist power fantasies which reflect Naomi Wolf’s belief that racial hierarchy and empire provide for more “overreaching fantasies of power” than modern, egalitarian rhetoric provides. Music video provides an excellent site in the contemporary “color-blind” environment to re-present these power fantasies because the fragmented, deconstructed, and non-linear nature of music videos, juxtaposing music, lyrics, and visuals, provides a cultural dreamscape with plausible deniability. As Stefani herself suggests the Harajuku style is merely “style detached from content,” an argument that many critics make about contemporary music videos as a whole.¹²⁸ And yet, historically saturated, content-laden images of women in positions of power, particularly raced, classed, and gendered fantasies of white women as plantation mistresses, factory owners, and imperial philanthropist mothers, recur with regularity throughout these, and many other, pop artists’ work. Whether or not race is necessarily imbricated in feminist fantasies of hierarchical power, the racial histories of the West and white women’s privileged role within them certainly provide culturally-ready shorthand for these fantasies to emerge visually.

¹²⁷“Gwen on Throne (Photo),” (2008), <http://disgrasian.com/tag/wacky-japs/>; “Fergie as the ‘Dutchess’ (Photo),” (2006), <http://gallery.celebritypro.com/celebrity-photo-15071.htm>; “Lady Gaga with Crown (Photo),” (2011), <http://www.sugarscape.com/main-topics/fashion-beauty/464832/who-wore-it-best-christina-or-gaga>.

² Barbara Ehrenreich, "Bonfire of the Disney Princesses," *The Nation*, Dec 24 2007, xxii; Susan J. Douglas, *Where the girls are : growing up female with the mass media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Marcia R. Lieberman, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972).

³ Naomi Wolf, "Mommy, I want to be a Princess," *New York Times*(2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/02/opinion/magazine-global-agenda-mommy-i-want-to-be-a-princess.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&emc=eta1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Douglas, *The rise of enlightened sexism : how pop culture took us from girl power to Girls Gone Wild*: 279.

⁶ Julia T. Wood, *Gendered lives : communication, gender, and culture* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub., 1994).

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CHAPTER 6 (CONCLUSION): FROM ALIBI TO ACCOUNTABILITY

The chapters I have laid out in this dissertation have attempted to address a number of discursive strategies of feminist or female empowerment that are entangled in histories, metaphors, and privileges of racial hierarchy. The investment in white privilege and racial inequity, both historical and continuing, secures certain modes of empowerment for white women through the appropriation, marginalization, and exploitation of the cultures, bodies, symbolisms, and subjectivities of men and women of color, black, Latino, and Asian. Yet, because these scenarios enable “women”—albeit a subset of women who can summon the privileges of race, class, and nationality for their advancement—the racial problematics are often subsumed under a feminist alibi. But what this dissertation has sought to reveal is that in the realm of the cultural dreamscape of music videos, the racial unconscious of the U.S. provides racial memories, histories, and inequities as raw materials for (white) feminist fantasy. Naming and acknowledging these complicities is the first step in exposing the alibi, and moving towards a feminism without alibi, which locates a feminist subject of power in accountable relation to others, or what Aimee Carrillo Rowe calls a “politics of relation.”¹

This dissertation focuses on the songs, videos, interviews and public personae of Fergie, Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga. The use of these strategies are not limited to these three performers, but I have chosen to focus on these three because the narratives of female empowerment within racialized metaphors seem most crystalized in their performances. Yet, the cholo/a persona emerges also in Pink, Ke\$ha, and Madonna videos. Britney Spears ties “look-at-me” sexual empowerment to a very blond white femininity that she often contrasts with men and women-of-color background singers. Katy Perry ties vintage pin-up sexuality to female empowerment under the gaze of the black male, especially in her “California Gurls” video starring Snoop Dogg. The list is expansive and expanding. In short, what I am arguing is that these strategies are not unique to

Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, nor do I hold these stars particularly responsible for these strategies. That is the solution is not just to get Lady Gaga to do more culturally sensitive videos. Rather, these racial narratives that circulate around female empowerment are part of the broader cultural unconscious. These discourses emerge in music video to be sure, but they also emerge in television, film, and, the true underlying concern of this critique, feminist theory. They were deployed overtly during first wave feminist discourse, when suffragettes used the language of empire and racial solidarity to make a case for expanded public rights. They functioned as a presence/absence through second wave solipsistic discourse which attempted to subsume racial difference under gender universality. And, in the third wave, which explicitly declares itself to be diverse, colorblind and post-race, they continue to circulate in ever adaptive forms through postmodern, avant garde fragments and citations in music, fashion, lyrics, and visual icons.

One of the challenges of this work has been to make analytically discrete what is essentially a tangle of concurrent and overlapping discourses, images, and rhetorical strategies. In some instances, a particular tendency may be the main thrust of the video, while in others there are only hints and fragments. Occasionally, all of the strategies discussed in this dissertation emerge in a single cultural performance. Madonna's half-time show at *2012 Super Bowl* is one of those moments.²

Whenever I present my work on Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga, someone almost always asks me about Madonna and where she fits in this scheme. Exploding onto the pop scene in the 1980s, Madonna was one of the first post-second-wave female icons to successfully combine look-at-me sexuality with a message of female empowerment, and her videos and other cultural artifacts such as her book *Sex* are saturated with racial images and hierarchical power fantasies.³ However, when I started this work, Madonna seemed to be no longer current. As a scholar of popular culture (the popularity of which seems to move at the speed of light and sound), I am in ever fear that my work will be rendered culturally passé before it ever leaves my desktop. And yet,

when Madonna did the Super Bowl halftime show in 2012, it became clear that true masters of pop culture and their strategies never truly disappear, but are continually cycling and re-cycling.

During the pre-game press conference and twelve minute performance in the midst of the most watched television event in U.S. history, Madonna provides a perfect summation of the arguments discussed in this dissertation. Chapter 2, entitled “Put on the Suit and Play the Myth: White feminist appropriation of the Cholo/Chola in Popular Music,” focused on the use of the figure of the Latino *cholo/a* as a vehicle for the Third Wave ethos of combining hypermasculinity with exaggerated femininity in order to subvert gender fixity, and produce a tough, yet sexy feminist subject. Madonna appeared at her pre-game press conference wearing a feminized zoot suit, with draped pants, a long wallet chain, and fingerless gloves. She juxtaposes this masculine ensemble with the pencil thin eyebrows of the chola, long feminine hair, and a lace corset, sending the message that she is tough, ready to fight, and sexy all at the same time.

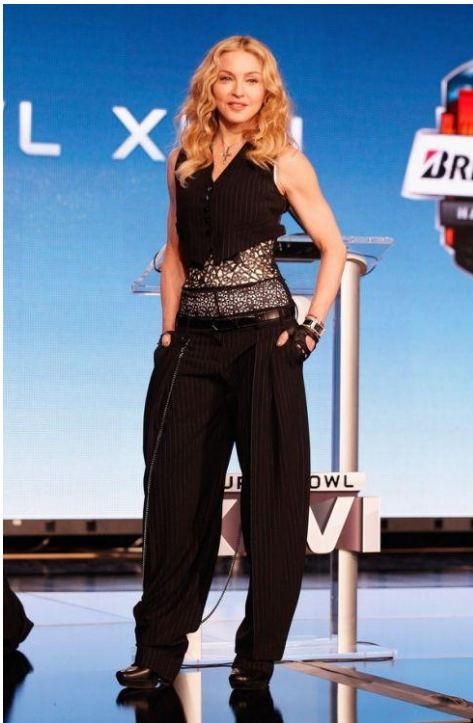


Figure 6.1 Madonna zooting the press conference⁴

During the performance, Madonna included a variation of the tough-girl theme by including two women-of-color female rappers in her performance, Nikki Minaj and M.I.A. These rappers bring a badass toughness to the performance as well as serve as Madonna's "back-up," reminiscent of Fergie's use of cholas and Gwen Stefani's use of Harajuku Girls who provide, among other things, a proximation of the homosocial girl-gang which provides a measure of protection for the emergence of female public sexuality. Of course, they also provide racial contrast that allows a white, blond Madonna to emerge as singular, and on top.

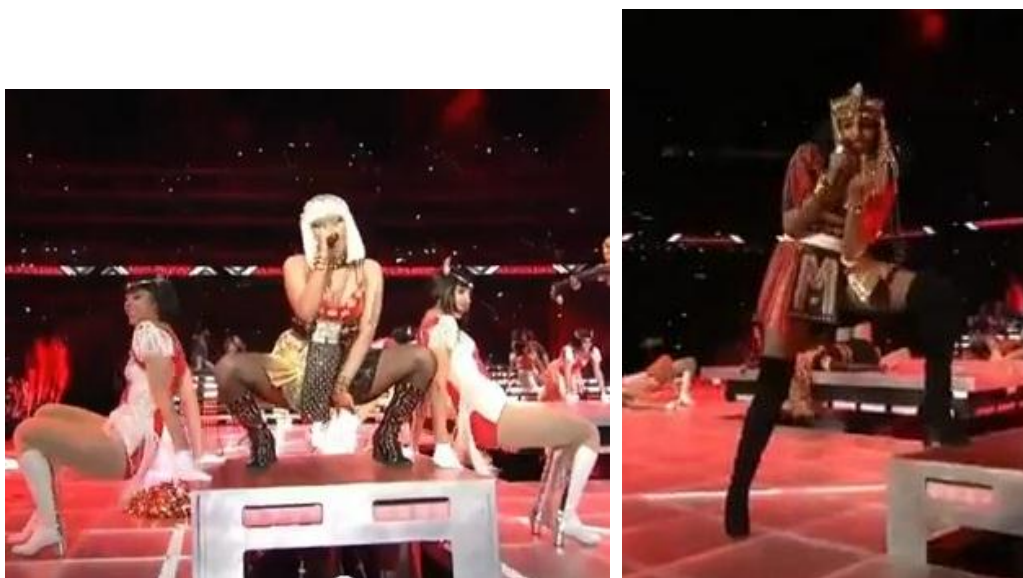


Figure 6.2 Nicki Minaj (*left*) and M.I.A. (*right*) provide Madonna feminine-masculine edge⁵

Chapter 3, entitled "'I'm looking at you looking at me:' Whiteness and the Feminist Subversion of the Gaze," focused on the use of the sexual gaze as a mode of empowerment, which is perhaps the most contested yet most prevalent third wave feminist trope circulating in popular culture. Chapter 3 discussed how the sexual gaze is now argued to be a site of potential power for women, rather than oppression — a reversal of Laura Mulvey's famous male gaze theory. In the new discourse of gaze empowerment, women knowingly and ironically deploy certain feminine stereotypes, such as strippers and cheerleaders, in order to manipulate, manage, and subvert the male gaze. Additionally, chapter 3 examined how *white* femininity has a particularly valorized

place in the gaze economy, particularly a vintage Hollywood blonde glamour. These white performers not only use the tropes of white femininity, but use men and women of color as racial contrasts that help them emerge visually and continually re-secure their position as the pinnacle of desirability.

Madonna demonstrates all of these elements in her performances. The lyrics of the songs she performs focus on corralling visuality and vintage glamour, such as her song “Vogue,” and soliciting the desire of others to assert her subjectivity, such as in her new song, “Give me all your Luvin,” in which she commands a desiring listener to give her all their “luvin.” She demonstrates her powerful position over the desiring one by ordering “don’t play stupid games” and suggests that her ability to organize that desiring relationship makes her a “different kind of girl.”⁶

At the same time that she lyrically establishes her desirability as a site of personal empowerment, Madonna plays on stereotypes of hyperfemininity on display, such as the trope of the cheerleader that we also saw in Gwen Stefani’s videos, as well as tropes of white femininity. Marked both by her signature blond hair, as well as the contrastive technique of surrounding herself with dozens of identically dressed and styled dark skin women with dark bobbed-hair, Madonna uses a vast cast of women-of-color background dancers to separate and elevate her as the singular (white) figure of desire.



Figure 6.3 Madonna out in front⁷



Figure 6.4 Madonna (*center*) is flanked not only by Nicki Minaj and M.I.A. but many other women of color to contrast with her blond whiteness.⁸

Chapter 4, entitled “Dangerous Miscegenies: Feminist Pleasure, Racial Danger, and Containment in the trope of Black Men Desiring White Women,” continues the discussion about the relationship between feminist gaze empowerment and race by looking at a particular and oft-repeated looking relation in the videos of white female performers. Specifically, I am referring to the use of the historical taboo of black men looking at white women to provide a heightened sense of both their desirability as white women, as well as provide a titillating sense of sexual danger granting women a fantasy scape to confront and overcome the ever-looming rape threat that accompanies the public performance of female sexuality. By using historically saturated relations of power which have granted white women the power of accusation (and thus life and death) over black men, desiring black men provide these white female performers an added boost of control because of the violent history of lynching which already subtends black male cross-racial desire. Additionally, chapter four discusses the ways in which “dangerous” black masculinities (and the risk to white supremacy that miscegenation poses) are contained through other narratives, such as queerness and relations of subordination, which position white women in a position of power and/or preserve the white heteropatriarchal family.

In addition to being framed by women of color, Madonna is surrounded and attended to by wave after wave of men of color. From the introductory moments of black men in angel wings and roman slave helmets serving her, to b-boys dancing around her, to LMFAO letting her take the line “I’m Sexy and I know it,” to Voguers, to CeeLo Green performing “Like A Prayer” with her (which invokes one of her infamous videos implying a sexual relation between her and black Jesus), Madonna is surrounded by desirable and often desiring, subordinate black men.



Figure 6.5 Being served by black male servants⁹



Figure 6.6 LMFAO agrees that Madonna is sexy and she knows it¹⁰

As suggested in chapter four, Madonna is surrounded by “dangerous” black male sexuality that is carefully managed and curtailed through a number of discursive strategies that preserve her authority and the “sanctity” of white femininity. The muscular men of color attendants and b-boys are configured in subordinate roles to Madonna, especially as she presents as a queen, and they are configured as a slave or servant. The party rock duo, LMFAO—in their animal print spandex, capes, giant sunglasses, and retro ‘fros—are depicted as cartoonish characters, which tends to neutralize any sexual threat. And performer CeeLo Green, a large-bodied man wearing a sparkly choir gown, is figured as an (asexual) “Magical Negro,” who raises the stage with a gesture of his arms.



Figure 6.7 CeeLo Green is sparkly and magical¹¹

Finally, in chapter five, entitled “Everybody Wants to Rule the World: Race and Feminist Fantasies of Power in the Music Videos of Fergie, Gwen Stefani and Lady Gaga,” I focused on feminist power fantasies and their dependency on and entanglements with the labor of others, particularly people of color. Chapter five explored three themes subsumed under the overarching fantasy of female royalty or sovereignty: white-mistress plantation fantasies, self-branding factory labor fantasies, and colonial/imperial savior fantasies of white motherhood. In this performance, Madonna blew all hints of royalty such as Lady Gaga’s egg-palanquin at the 2011 *Grammy’s* and

Fergie's cocked-crown "Dutchess"-ness out of the water, with a massive display of power. Madonna, perched on a giant throne carried by possibly hundreds of Romanesque slaves asserts that she is no mere princess, duchess, or even queen. Rather, Madonna, with a direct and unabashed display of multi-racial slave labor (using a Roman setting as an alibi here), sets herself apart as the *Empress*.



Figure 6.8 Madonna on a massive throne¹²



Figure 6.9 Muscular "Roman" slaves pulling her palanquin¹³

Further, although Madonna does not deploy the imagery of the factory directly, she is no stranger to self-branding. Her song “Give me all your luvin” invokes her name, Madonna, in the third person, as a brand. But Madonna does not say it herself. Rather, her throngs of identical dark-skinned cheerleaders chant “Madonna,” and then march themselves into a logo for the Madonna brand: “M.” In this case, they are not only the laborers who chant and construct the brand “Madonna” but use their bodies as the raw materials for the brand to be constructed on-stage.

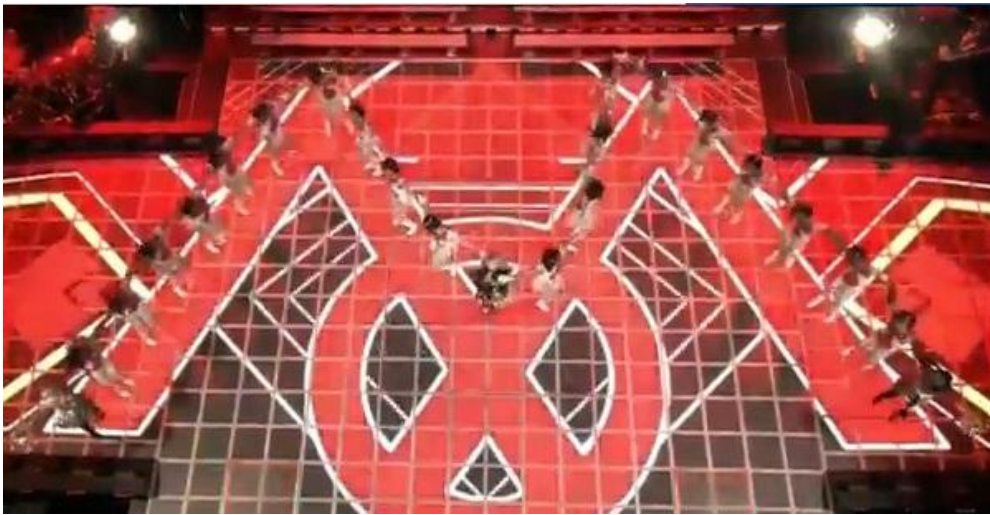


Figure 6.10 Madonna’s cheerleaders form the “M” in the Madonna brand.¹⁴

Finally, as Chapter five addresses directly, Madonna has made a name for herself as the colonial mother through her “Raising Malawi” campaign and international adoption of two children from Africa. Madonna reminds her audience of her missionary zeal or savior attitude in the final song performed with Cee-lo, as she commands a gospel choir on a raised platform through the religiously-saturated song, “Like a Prayer.” When the overhead lights go out, floor lights spell out “World Peace,” suggesting a missionary ideology that in addition to ruling the world, Madonna also intends to save the world.



Figure 6.11 Madonna as exalted savior¹⁵



Figure 6.12 Madonna's missionary promise¹⁶

Putting all these narratives together, Madonna's half-time performance is, in essence, a 12 minute homage to third wave female empowerment. She presents herself as an empress, as sexy, as the pinnacle of desire, as a tough girl, *and* as the great compassionate mother. Through one performance, she makes the case that women should be able to be simultaneously feminine *and* tough, bosses *and* mothers, sexy *and* autonomous. What Madonna makes clear, and what hopefully I have elucidated throughout this dissertation, is that these depictions are built, fundamentally,

through narratives of racial difference and hierarchies, and literally through the bodies and labor of men and women of color. Neither Madonna, nor the figures of this study, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, or Lady Gaga, use regressive racial depictions incidentally or randomly. Rather, as each chapter of this dissertation details, racial hierarchy, both historically and in the contemporary moment *is* the enabling construct, the very foundations upon which many of these feminist tropes are built.

A common response to a project of critique, such as the one I have just undertaken, is, “If not this, then what?” In other words, are there other artists and performances that are doing a different kind of feminist, anti-racist work that third wave feminists should rally around? Sure. But the problem ultimately is not simply one of finding, producing or celebrating “better” popular culture. It is unlikely that the most revolutionary cultural texts will find an audience if they don’t resonate with the audience’s desire for power, recognition, and pleasure. As Sheena Malhotra puts it: “Isn’t that what feminism has always been about? Choices? Empowerment? Agency? Power? Isn’t that what drew me here?”¹⁷ Thus, an alternative feminism and an alternative pop culture, one that is anti-racist and decolonial, might start at the level of re-defining and transforming the narrow, racially problematic, and pathological conceptions of power and feminist subjectivities that get affectively reinforced in the popular sphere. In sum, I am suggesting that what needs to change are not the cultural texts themselves as much as the feminist audience’s orientation to those texts. I propose that feminist theory, popular culture, and activism is better served by continuing the work of cultivating critical anti-racist consciousness through what Aimee Carrillo Rowe calls “radical belonging” or the “politics of relation.”¹⁸ Carrillo Rowe’s theorizations envision a transracial feminism that requires feminists of privilege to “take responsibility for her own complicity in contemporary and historic relations of ruling, not to feel bad or guilty, but to truly heal the violence through which our ancestors, and by extension, our current generation, relate to one another through segregation and separation.”¹⁹

By critically evaluating the racial-imperial precepts subtending the various feminist discourses examined in this dissertation, I do not mean to suggest we should reject these performers outright, dismiss the opportunities and resonances they provide their fans, or claim to present the final reading of the meaning of these texts. I also do not intend to suggest that feminists should seek out ideologically pure or innocent figures for adulation. The racial problematics of these performances are not overcome by simply avoiding or denouncing the particular performances of Fergie, Gwen Stefani, and Lady Gaga. In fact, such a distancing might serve as yet another alibi to avoid facing the racial unconscious revealed by these performers. Rather, my intent is to underscore the need to interrogate their resonances and affective mechanisms as part of a method of accountability, healing, and discovery of the racial practices, elisions, and oppressions that need to be faced if a transracial, decolonial feminism is to thrive. In fact, some of my own confrontations with white privilege were inaugurated through my fascination with Gwen Stefani in the 1990s. Her presentation as a white chola gave me an entrance point to examine my own racial subjectivity as a working class, gender-queer, white girl who was known to sport Dickies and a wallet chain while trying to navigate the Latino *barrio* where I spent much of my adolescence. However, the fiercely negative reaction to Stefani's cultural appropriation from my Chicana/o friends led me to develop a more complicated understanding of privilege and culture than a racially segregated fandom of Stefani would have provided. It was, as I develop further below, my relationships with and to people of color that helped me form – and instilled the desire to form — a more radical consciousness around white privilege and race.

Further, although I interrogate the performers in this particular project through a lens directly targeting whiteness and racial hierarchy, there is also room to look for the spaces where even the most hegemonic messages can be subverted, willfully misread, and repurposed for counter-hegemonic ends. Chela Sandoval asserts that even some of the most hegemonic texts can be mined for oppositional resources and influences therein as she suggests “no canonical Western

thought is free of de-colonial effects.”²⁰ This sentiment is echoed in Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, supported by a vast literature on oppositional reading practices, which suggests that the dominant or hegemonic encoded meanings of a text do not dictate the entirety of how a text may be read, used, experienced, and decoded.²¹ For instance, Gayatri Gopinath discusses how Madonna’s appropriation of South Asian musical culture in “Ray of Light” is counter-appropriated by South Asian drag queens, who take advantage of her decontextualizing move to re-claim and queer their own culture outside of homophobic, nationalistic conceptions. She argues, “Queer diasporic cultural practices challenge ‘millennial orientalism’ not through an outright rejection of dominant cultural forms but through a highly pleasurable refashioning of them; such practices thus open up a queer counterpublic space that both references and resists the simultaneous absorption and elision of subcultural forms within the dominant public sphere.”²² Similarly, Gwen Stefani is followed by queer Latino fans who also use her appropriation of Latina/o culture to create space for their own projects of reclamation and re-signification of what might otherwise be exclusionary nationalist cultures.

I am also highly cognizant of the powerful role Lady Gaga serves in validating, recognizing, and encouraging marginalized youth, particularly in the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. At a time when there is an epidemic of suicides by LGBT and other youth who face bullying, ostracization, and isolation, Lady Gaga’s message of self-love, value, and acknowledgement of her fans should not be dismissed or underrated. I am not hardened to the need for messages of encouragement and acceptance for those struggling in the trenches of marginalization. But I do hope to warn against the tendency to celebrate anything that uplifts “the marginalized” if it does so by trampling on or marginalizing others. This kind of thinking is echoed by Naomi Wolf’s power feminism in which she recommends using any and all privileges or advantages to get ahead, such as her notion that “enough money buys a woman out of a lot of sex oppression.”²³ But “why not?” some feminists have both directly and indirectly asked. If there is

indeed a way to fight sexism by using privilege of whiteness and wealth, why not go ahead and use everything in the arsenal to dismantle the powerful and ancient construct of patriarchy?

First, such a question presumes that gender *can* be extracted from race and class, that these constructs are not co-constituted, are not historically entangled, and located in relations of power. Each of the chapters of this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate the ways that discourses of gender are always already caught up in racial and imperial histories and thus contribute to an extraordinary literature by women-of-color feminists, anti-racist activists and post-colonial theorists who recognize the irreducible entanglements of race and gender. But there is also a deeper principle here—a semantic connotation which paints words like “privilege” and “supremacy” as assets or positive attributes—that needs to be deconstructed. By focusing only on the material privileges of whiteness and class, warns white anti-racist activist Mab Segrest, theorists risk painting too compelling a story about whiteness: “such a calculation can almost be too convincing. Why would anyone give up such privilege?”²⁴ Instead, feminist theory should reject a conception of power that is individualistic and exclusive. Feminist theory should shift away from a conception of power that reproduces violent imperial, racist relations, and one that ultimately undermines the health, spirit, and well-being of the perpetrator.

If, as Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Judith Butler, and many others insist, our subjectivities are not wholly autonomous and individual, but are profoundly shaped by our relation to others, then what happens to one section of the feminist body politic, affects the whole. Drawing on the theorization of interconnectedness, Sheena Malhotra makes the analogy of whiteness and other forms of oppression to cancer:

If cancer in its various forms, in different parts of our collective body, is the metaphorical equivalent of the ‘interlocking systems of domination’ manifested in the various ‘isms’ that affect society, how do [feminists] develop the vision, the tools, and the skills to heal ourselves and the collective whole? Just as we know that if cancer develops in one part of our bodies and remains unchecked it will eventually impact the whole, can we also see that we need to develop a feminism that addresses not only the individual cells of cancer but heals us holistically?²⁵

Thus, for Malhotra, a feminism based on individualism, exclusion, and empowerment tangled in racial oppression is not only not ideal, but perhaps fatal, as the cancer has the potential to infect and affect the entire social body. The metaphor of cancer also highlights that the ability to leverage white privilege is not an unequivocal advantage for white feminists. Segrest writes extensively, both through memoir and in her theorizations about the pathological effects of power derived from violence, and domination of others: “what we miss when we only calculate our privilege is insight into the profound damage racism has done to us, as if we as a people could participate in such an inhuman set of practices and beliefs over five centuries of European hegemony and not be, in our own ways, devastated emotionally and spiritually.”²⁶ Others, such as psychologist Aída Hurtado, also argue that domination is not a natural psychological state. In the *Color of Privilege*, Hurtado details, “it takes psychological work to maintain privilege; it takes cognitive training not to empathize or feel for your victims - how individuals get socialized to accomplish the abnormal should be at the core of a reflexive theory of subordination.”²⁷ And, identifying the emotional costs of perceptual exclusion, memoirist Jane Lazarre asks, “what sort of diminishment took place in white Americans who witnessed this tearing apart of mothers and children [during slavery] and in white Americans who remain oblivious to this piece of our history today?”²⁸ Rather than viewing that “obliviousness” as a shield against the horror of human slavery, Lazarre pushes us to wonder “what sort of psychological distortion must take place in us in order 'not to know' the reality of this immense subjugation?”²⁹

These distortions, Segrest argues, affect all our systems of social health, emotionally and physically. On the emotional front, Segrest describes, “in gaining power, whites lose comfort of the nonmaterial kind: ease, well-being, consolation, help, solace, and relief. In acquiring hatred, white lose feelings and practices of love.”³⁰ The domination, violence, and resulting alienation contributes to a traumatized culture, which Segrest links with the need to anesthetize through alcoholism and

addiction in the U.S., the high levels of stress leading to cancer and heart disease, and the loss of soul leading to the epidemic occurrences of eating disorders, and sexual abuse.

Segrest's claims resonate with my own family history that is marked by virulent racism as well as well-meaning liberal white privilege. My father's side includes former slave owners who lost a significant portion their wealth as a result of Emancipation and, in turn, were instrumental in the formation of the KKK in the Mississippi county they resided in. My mother's side includes Swedish immigrants who changed their last name from a potentially American-sounding "Andersson" to an unmistakably Swedish-sounding "Cederwall" because there were Blacks in the Minnesota area where they immigrated to with the surname Anderson, and they did not want to be mistaken for, or associated with them. My family history is marked by white privilege and we have been and, in some cases, are, active perpetrators of racism. And yet, at the same time, my family continues to be affected by everything Segrest named, and more. Both my family lineages are scarred with long histories of alcoholism and addiction, mental illness, hoarding, suicide, relational violence, sexual abuse, and trauma. It turns out that the segmentation and devaluation of people (even seemingly contained by categories such as race) has deeply painful rippling effects upon the self-esteem and spiritual health of the so-called "superior" people. If anyone is expendable, deep down the threat exists that everyone is potentially expendable at some point, perhaps for some as-of-yet defined infraction. And that is an anxious, lonely, and desolate way to live, as generations of dysfunction can attest. Thus, as Aimee Carrillo Rowe suggests, "feminists of privilege have a stake in decolonial and antiracist work. It is not work to save the other, but rather, as Segrest compels us to consider, to save our own souls. This move entails wresting the subject from the individual, knowing from possessing, love from benevolence."³¹

Feminism without Alibi –Love and “Infinite Responsibility”³²

The challenge lies in an ethical commitment to work to transform terror into engagement based on empathy and a vision of justice for everyone. After all, this is at the heart of building solidarity across otherwise debilitating social, economic, and psychic boundaries.

—Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty³³

The kind of intervention into feminist popular culture and analysis I hope ultimately to make is not so much one of content -- though I do think I provide some pretty interesting content herein -- but rather, one of perspective and approach. There are two intertwined key orientations that I think are central to producing a truly powerful “feminism without victims” that not only is accountable to and for differences in race, class, sexuality, ability, nationality, and gender within feminism, but is situated to “deploy difference as its potentially most productive quality.”³⁴ The first is the deconstructionist principle of “infinite responsibility” or theoretical humility that asks us as feminists to expose every alibi, be accountable for the structures of domination masquerading under the discursive banners of empowerment, and be willing to continuously do the work of self-interrogation of our popular texts, our practices, our theories, and our affective commitments. The second orientation is what Chela Sandoval calls the technology or “decolonizing *Movida*” of “love.”³⁵ Love is shorthand for a relational positioning that enables the potentially radical transformations of subject, of affect, of desire, of commitment from one moved by individualistic zero-sum scramble for power to a revolutionary power based in belonging.

Deconstructionist theorists, such as Derrida, Bakhtin, and Spivak suggest that to be “without alibi” is to acknowledge radical historicity and contingency in both language and subjectivity. For Bakhtin this means we need to recognize there is no such thing as an autonomous utterance. Instead, all language is dialogic and saturated with heteroglossia (the voices of others). That is, any utterance is profoundly shaped and constituted by the cultural conversation that precedes it and contributes to the cultural stream that continues. As such, for Bakhtin, language structures us ontologically in irreducible relation to one another. To be without alibi means to acknowledge and be answerable to that radical relationality.³⁶ For Derrida being without alibi is also a position of

profound responsibility to one another that requires ongoing vigilance.³⁷ Campbell Jones explains Derrida's position as not a: "certitude that one has done the right things... but instead ... involves undecideability. Undecideability is the condition of possibility for ethic, politics and justice, and for responsibility.... This is a thinking that calls into question the reassurances that previously might have been available. It is a thinking, clearly, 'without alibi.' No alibis, no excuses. Infinite responsibility."³⁸ For Gayatri Spivak, to be without alibi means to adopt a kind of vigilant deconstructive practice that acknowledges and incorporates strategic practices and engagements that must be constantly under review while being suspicious of claims to "theoretical purity" through which scholars can "keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything."³⁹ Ilan Kapoor clarifies that for Spivak "the point is to take seriously that with which one is familiar, to acknowledge that one is seduced by it, even as one engages in a persistent critique of it."⁴⁰ Thus, Spivak argues, "let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it."⁴¹ Thus, to be "without alibi" as discussed by the deconstructionists raises three key ideas: inescapable relationality to one another, a contingency of theory that eschews "purity" (or alibi) and instead calls upon continual vigilance and deconstruction, and an accountability that recognizes rather than seeks to exonerate the messy complicities. What this means for critical cultural studies is that to be without alibi is to always stay alert to the ways in which theory, knowledge, and popular texts necessarily foreground some subjects, ideas, and power relations and elide others. Critical vigilance means to interrogate the ways we are seduced by certain ideas, and to continually engage in the process of accountability to one another. For feminism, this includes the need to continuously deconstruct and interrogate complicities with domination, racial hierarchy, oppression, and imperialism. For white feminists and other feminists of privilege who participate in or benefit from these relations of domination, this may require auto-analysis to break through the ideological constructs and walls of denial that tend to bolster the white ego-subject but sicken the soul.

But the final point of this dissertation is that there is no need to go it alone. Sandoval suggests that Roland Barthes' great failure is that he isolated himself in his radical semiology as a "lone hero of semiology," excluded "estranged" and "cutoff" from the mainstream society.⁴² Sandoval sees in his self-imposed exile a missed opportunity to connect to "a new kind of community – which already surrounds him, but which he can only partially perceive."⁴³ The social justice work of anti-racist decolonization need not be lonely or joyless. It need not reject the affective mobilizations of popular texts in favor of cold theory, nor must it entail giving up something that feels good, for something that is good for you, (like broccoli). Instead, many social justice scholars use words like "love" and "belonging" to capture the ecstatic possibilities of cross-cultural alliances.

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval suggests that "love" can be understood as a "hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subject, regardless of social class, towards a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement."⁴⁴ While the word "love" —especially in its connotations of romance or family – may seem like an uncomfortably non-academic term on which to predicate the radical transformation of feminism, it is precisely the affective, affiliative, counter-rational, erotic, excessive, and spiritual connotations that draw decolonial scholars. Sandoval elaborates, "Third world writers such as Guevara, Fanon, Anzuldúa, Emma Pérez, Trinn Minh-ha, or Cherríe Moraga, to name only a few, similarly understand love as 'breaking' through whatever controls in order to find 'understanding and community'" or a "'rupturing' in one's everyday world that permits crossing over to another."⁴⁵ Thus, for Sandoval, "love" describes a decolonial "*movida*" – a move, a scene, or a mode — which can pierce through imperial mystifications and ideologies which suppress the vibrancy and potential of movements for social justice.

On similar lines, Carrillo Rowe argues that who you love, i.e. who you are in community with, and who you consider as an essential part of your survival in the world create "sites of our

belonging [which] constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming."⁴⁶ The radical potential of love, then, is the potential that alliances formed across locations of identity – when accountable and struggled for — can re-make even the privileged subject in transformative and powerfully healing ways.

The orientation towards one another, towards community, and the radical healing potential found within the politics of love does not gloss over structural and material differences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, nor does it excuse, cover over, or deny complicities in relations of domination. Instead, it is a feminism without alibi, one that holds feminists deeply accountable to one another. Carrillo Rowe adds: "Transracial feminist alliances call us out on multiple fronts: the politics of our communication practices, our visions of ourselves and of others, our very ontologies are all at stake, moving towards a posture of vulnerability, responsibility, and deep and compassionate curiosity about how we got to where we are – a willingness to see and know and feel in radically new ways."⁴⁷ This orientation towards one another holds both a promise of radical belonging and fierce accountability. For a feminist of privilege, the deconstruction of subjectivities built on inequality can be, at times, painful and bewildering, but as Mab Segrest assures, "neither I, nor you, are born to segregation, separation, domination, subordination, alienation, isolation, ownership, competition, or narrow self-interest." Instead, she posits, "we are all born to belonging, and we know ourselves as humans in just and mutual relationships to one another."⁴⁸

Both of these orientations – infinite responsibility and love — move us away from an anxious search for ideologically innocent texts, theories, and subjectivities towards the possibility of fiercely radical and revolutionary standpoints which have infinite possibility for expression in art, performance and song.

¹ Carrillo Rowe, *Power lines : on the subject of feminist alliances*; ; Derrida and Kamuf, *Without alibi*.

² Hamish Hamilton, "Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show featuring Madonna," (NBC, 2012).

- ³ bell hooks, "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?," in *Black looks : race and representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992); Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Flagging Madonna : performing a Puerto Rican-American erotics " in *Boricua pop : Puerto Ricans and the latinization of American culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).
- ⁴ Unknown, "Madonna in Zoot Suit at Pre-game Press Conference (Photo)," *AllAboutMadonna.com*(2012), <http://allaboutmadonna.com/images/news/12-02-02-madonna-superbowl-press-conference-22.jpg>.
- ⁵ Screenshot. "M.I.A. and Nikky Minaj at Super Bowl Halftime (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ⁶ Madonna et al., *Give Me All Your Luvin' (song performed by Madonna)*, 2011. Interscope, Live Nation.
- ⁷ Reuters, "Madonna Out in Front (photo)," *Dailymail.co.uk*(2012), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2097020/Madonna-Super-Bowl-halftime-2012-Singer-suffers-small-slip-up.html>.
- ⁸ Screenshot. "Madonna framed by women of color (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ⁹ Reuters, "Black men serving Madonna (Photo)," *Daily Mail Online (UK)*(2012), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2097020/Madonna-Super-Bowl-halftime-2012-Singer-suffers-small-slip-up.html>.
- ¹⁰ Screenshot. "LMFAO 'Sexy and I Know it' (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ¹¹ ———. "CeeLo Green as the Magical Negro (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ¹² ———. "Madonna on a Massive Throne (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ¹³ ———. "Madonna's slaves -- using the Roman alibi (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ¹⁴ ———. "Branding Madonna (Photo)." From *Bridgestone Superbowl XLVI Halftime Show*. Directed by Hamish Hamilton. Performed by Madonna. 2012. Accessed at NBC/YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ik_8QjM3U&feature=related. (4/5/2012).
- ¹⁵ FilmMagic, "Madonna as the Great White Savior (Photo)," *Daily Mail Online (UK)*(2012), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2097020/Madonna-Super-Bowl-halftime-2012-Singer-suffers-small-slip-up.html>.
- ¹⁶ Getty, "Madonna's missionary zeal (Photo)," *Daily Mail Online (UK)*(2012), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2097020/Madonna-Super-Bowl-halftime-2012-Singer-suffers-small-slip-up.html>.
- ¹⁷ Malhotra, "Engaging Power Feminism Through My Dance With Cancer," 117.
- ¹⁸ Carrillo Rowe, "Subject to Power--Feminism Without Victims."
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁰ Sandoval, *Methodology of the oppressed*: 4.
- ²¹ Hall and Open, *Representation : cultural representations and signifying practices*; hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.,"; David Morley, "Texts, Readers, and Subjects," in *Culture, media, language : working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall (London; [Birmingham, West Midlands]: Hutchinson ; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980); See also Habell-Pallan's notion of "rasquache" in Habell-Pallan, *Loca motion : the travels of Chicana and Latina popular culture*.
- ²² Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible desires : queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*, Perverse modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 30.
- ²³ Wolf, *Fire with fire : the new female power and how it will change the 21st century.*, 52

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- ²⁴ Segrest, *Born to belonging : writings on spirit and justice*: 158.
- ²⁵ Malhotra, "Engaging Power Feminism Through My Dance With Cancer," 115.
- ²⁶ Segrest, *Born to belonging : writings on spirit and justice*: 158.
- ²⁷ Hurtado, *The color of privilege : three blasphemies on race and feminism*: 130.
- ²⁸ Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the whiteness of whiteness : memoir of a white mother of Black sons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 12.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ³⁰ Segrest, *Born to belonging : writings on spirit and justice*: 159.
- ³¹ Carrillo Rowe, "Subject to Power--Feminism Without Victims," 30.
- ³² Campbell Jones, "Friedman with Derrida," *Business & Society Review Business and Society Review* 112, no. 4 (2007).
- ³³ Alexander and Mohanty, *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*: xlii.
- ³⁴ Carrillo Rowe, "Subject to Power--Feminism Without Victims," 14.
- ³⁵ Sandoval, *Methodology of the oppressed*: 139.
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