

Radical Bodies in Music Video  
Feminism, Queerness, and Subversive Performance of Gender

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Declaration: I declare that this thesis is my own original work.

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### **Abstract**

It is the objective of this research to establish how categories of sex and gender have been subverted through queer and feminist performance in music video since the launch of MTV in 1981. It was at this point that music video entered domestic space, and became a fixture of the music industry. The medium's cultural ubiquity, and its continually provocative aesthetic experimentation since MTV's inception reinforce this period as an arena of study. This project is approached in critical and practical ways, which respond to the following research questions: How is gender performed to subversive effect in music video? How have methods of performative subversion in music video participated in, or been affected by significant social and technological shifts since 1981?

In its critical approach, this thesis considers music videos in dialogue with queer, feminist, and dramatic theory as a means of locating queer and feminist agency in subversive performance. Chapters of the text have been organised in consideration of significant cultural conjunctures, which further contextualise subversive strategies of performance in the work. The first chapter examines music videos whose aesthetics and themes participated in the project of AIDS awareness between the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second chapter explores the proliferation of gender identities in the contemporary landscape of music video. It considers how this has been accommodated by changing modes of production, distribution, and regulation after the internet, and shifting norms of gender and sexuality, evidenced by the legalisation of same sex marriage in the United States and the United Kingdom. The final chapter examines the intersection of sexual and racial identity in work by black artists since the Black Lives Matter movement began in 2012.

The practical methodology of this thesis culminates in video projections whose incorporation in live pop music performance creates music videos in real time. This work operates within the post-internet expansion of the medium's visual economy—its form, regulation, distribution, and borders—and draws on first-hand manipulation of the actions and images which define gender norms. These works expand visual themes of feminism and queerness in a live setting through modes of subversive gender performance, comparable to those explored in the objects of study. In this research, text, video, and performance function

together. The critical identification and interpretation of subversive performance both relies on, and informs its practical production.

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## Preface

At the age of 14, I started singing in a band called Schoolyard Heroes. Over the course of ten years playing music together, my bandmates and I manifested our ambitions into a non-stop cycle of writing, recording, performing live, and making music videos. We signed to major label, Island/Def Jam Records, toured extensively throughout North America, and received attention from American press and radio. As our commercial recognition increased, I experienced contradictory feelings of obligation and entitlement about how to present myself on stage. I felt obligated to visually communicate my experience, and found aesthetics, costumes, and movements to be the most immediate, and familiar tools at my disposal. If this was a project I was going to commit to, I felt entitled to take it to an extreme—to make my intentions overtly legible. Though I did not recognise it in such terms at the time, the experience I was trying to communicate might be described in hindsight as a feminist self-possession. I was proud of succeeding in an industry dominated by cisgender men, and that our music connected with a large audience, most which was comprised of young women, who were also collectively penetrating the historically male territory of rock culture. I traded my jeans and band t-shirts for formal vintage dresses that I cropped to a short length. My hair was in a constant cycle of being bleached, dyed, or chopped into some new asymmetrical shape. I got our band's acronym, SYH, tattooed between my breasts.

Initially, I questioned whether the traditional appeal of my decidedly feminine aesthetics of heavy makeup and costume dresses played into a regression, or at least an unprogressive stasis of women, by repeating trodden territory aligned with antiquated expectations of the female role (i.e.: to be sweet, submissive, obedient, tender, passive, demure etc.). However, when this aesthetic was paired with our aggressive, angular music, and the confrontational, sexual, and shocking performance it inspired from me—screaming, often sweating my makeup into a mess, smearing it intentionally, or shredding parts of my dresses to allow for the types of movement on stage that might leave me bruised and sore— I found power in the destructive sacrifice of beauty and femininity. The actions and performance were subverting the image, and by extension, the historical expectations of womanhood. Through performance, I felt the potential to challenge an audience's expectations of a woman, and

encourage a new view of femininity. This attitude stayed with me off stage. It has guided various incarnations of the same project for 17 years.

However, I would like to further address femininity here, and clarify that this dissonant pairing of historically feminine aesthetics with historically *unfeminine* actions did not ultimately serve to align cisgender women with a *new* rubric of stylised behaviour. Rather, the significance was in declaring that there is *no* rubric; no way of being, dressing, or performing, that is a stable product of one's sex or gender. Appropriating femininity was but one strategy of how this declaration could be made.

It should also be noted of the seemingly masochistic nature of the performance examples I have given that, though a disheveled appearance or injury was sometimes a by-product of my performances, it was never the goal, nor what I found rewarding about the experience. Many of the visual elements may have been read as masochistic, though the concepts unfolding here do not rely on masochism. As Kathy O'Dell explores in her text on masochistic performance, *Contract with the Skin* (1998), "Masochism is what converts distantiation into constructive alienation...The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticise constructively from a social point of view."<sup>1</sup> O'Dell references dramatist, Bertolt Brecht's alienation theory, or distancing effect, which discourages the audience from empathizing, or identifying with the performer in order to find the distance with which to intellectually, rather than personally, engage with the themes of the performance. O'Dell further suggests that masochism not only produces constructive alienation, but does so in order to, "blow the whistle on institutional frameworks that trigger it, and within which it is practiced."<sup>2</sup> Though I do not discourage the criticism of my performance that this strategy would provoke—and for those that did perceive my performances as masochistic, O'Dell suggests that constructive criticism would have been produced regardless of my intentions—I found our band's performances to be operating precisely outside the institutional frameworks whose corruption, O'Dell proposes, masochism seeks to expose. The spaces in which our music was

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

collectively experienced were meant to feel safe, inclusionary, and ideally, could produce the same evocative insight that masochism might, but without intentionally bringing physical harm to myself. Later, we will discuss examples of videos which utilise Brecht's distancing effect, showing that masochism is also not the only means of producing critical distance.

The institutional framework I sought to expose as corrupt was the limited framework of sex and gender. On stage, I experimented with ways of subverting gender by appropriating feminine aesthetics, and redefining the actions that femininity could represent. I was performing our music to the same extent that I was performing my gender. I sought to move our audience, to upset norms, and to provoke thought as well as deliver the fun, and freedom that attending live shows had always given me.

As it pertains to discussions of performativity, I might now observe that my actions, words, lyrics, and sounds, were, in fact, acting upon me: undoing my fear of feminine appearance by redefining an uncomfortable female role I once felt that appearance demanded me to play. The implications of my own experience echoed with the work of performance theorists, and queer and feminist discourse. My practice has provided the foundation upon which this research of subversive gender performance has been built.

## Introduction

Radical sexual representation is at the core of music video's historical controversies, and its contemporary visual economy. MTV banned Madonna's video, *Erotica* (1992) for nudity, and graphic BDSM scenes. Mykki Blanco explores queer, and virtual sex in *Loner* (2016), which was co-produced by pornography website, PornHub. And, in her *Formation* (2016) video, Beyoncé confronts the camera with both of her middle fingers raised. Her manicured nails are painted a deep red; she wears diamonds, and a black couture gown, and sings about getting "fucked good." These examples highlight a scope of queer and feminist resistance to the heteronormative framework in which music videos more commonly operate. Gender is performed in lurid, sexual, and provocative ways, which destabilise social norms and limitations. However, despite the abundance of such imagery in this popular, and accessible medium, there has yet to be a queer and feminist-focused study within music video discourse of the questions I consider in this text: How is gender performed to subversive effect in music video? How have methods of performative subversion in music video participated in, or been affected by significant social and technological shifts since the launch of MTV in 1981?

From its initial penetration of domestic space via MTV, the medium of music video has maintained its cultural ubiquity, and produced perpetually experimental, provocative, sexual imagery, which warrants continued analysis. This thesis expands queer and feminist discourse on music video through critical and practical approaches to its research. As part of its critical approach, this text makes a close visual analysis of the radical performances and images whose value is frequently overlooked for their standing within the often-disposable landscape of commercial, and popular culture. It draws on an un-studied contemporary archive, and re-considers seminal queer and feminist videos. By examining these works through the lenses of queer, feminist, and dramatic discourse, I locate queer and feminist agency in subversive performance. I also examine the relationship between the objects of study, and the historical climates in which they were produced. This approach further contextualises aesthetics and themes of the work as direct responses to cultural crises, and shifting conditions. It considers how the agency afforded by performance is utilised.

The practical research of this thesis is comprised of video projections used in live pop music performances to create music videos in real time. This work functions as part of the post-internet expansion of this medium, which will be explored at greater length in chapter two. These works allow personal experimentation with the aesthetics and actions that create our understanding of gender. In a live setting, they expand visual themes of feminism and queerness. Like the objects of study, these works rely on subversive strategies of performance. I will now elaborate on how these facets of the thesis contribute to knowledge, and fit within the study of Visual Cultures.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

#### I: Locating Subversive Agency in Queer and Feminist Performance

This project locates queer and feminist agency in performance by identifying the performative strategies which subvert sex and gender in music video. These strategies rely heavily on queer, pro-sex, and third wave feminist approaches to gender performance. Before proceeding, I will first situate “gender performance” as terminology, then consider the theorists working within queer and feminist discourses, who have informed the selection of objects of study.

#### Gender Performance

Gender performance refers broadly to the actions and aesthetics which produce an effect of gender. I reference Judith Butler here, who maintains that, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation.”<sup>3</sup> According to Butler, the act of gender produces its meaning. Gender is not a stable condition, but an “effect” we have mistaken as a product of sex. She approaches sexuality in the same way, claiming that, “Indeed, in its efforts to naturalise itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of its own

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 21.

originality...”<sup>4</sup> Butler maintains that sexuality, like gender, is unstable, and that heterosexuality is repeated out of the compulsion, and necessity to confirm that it is the natural standard. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler accounts for how these effects are maintained:

“As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation.”<sup>5</sup>

In this statement, Butler clarifies that by performing gender we re-experience its socially established meaning, which continues to legitimise gender roles. I must clarify here that, though Butler refers to a naturalised repetition of the performance of gender in the passage above, she also argues that gender is performative. She differentiates this from gender’s theatricality, saying, “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”<sup>6</sup> This quote from *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) clarifies that gender is constituted in its very determination, before its performance begins, but also as it is perpetually performed. She maintains, “performativity describes both the processes of being acted on, and the conditions and possibilities for acting.”<sup>7</sup> Though I agree with Butler, I have also clarified her terminology because this thesis frequently refers to “performative strategies,” not as strategies of performativity, but of performance, whose subversive strategies respond to the limiting effects of gender performativity. In the instances where I draw from Butler’s definition, this will be made clear.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” (lecture, Instituto Franklin, Madrid, June 7, 2014)

<http://www.institutofranklin.net/sites/default/files/files/Rethinking%20Vulnerability%20and%20Resistance%20Judith%20Butler.pdf>, (accessed April 10, 2017).



Butler lays out the restrictive frameworks of gender, sex, and sexuality, and the acts of imitation which ironically fortify those frameworks through the familiarity of the performance. If normative practices of gender and sexuality have been established through repeated performance, then queer and feminist gender performances propose the alternative identities and desires that reject normative limitations.

For example, Jennifer Blessing, curator of the Guggenheim exhibition, *Rrose is Rrose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (1997), approaches gender performance as its own mode of defense against the cyclic restriction considered by Butler. She identifies the following qualities in the work she included in the exhibition:

“highly artficed, social images with a remote, lapidary quality that exude an exhibitionist self-delight without for a moment indicating any gap in the performance, any self-doubt any sentimentality... images of fantasy that represent the dream of total control, the icy demeanor of mastery, like a femme fatale preserved on film, the classic phallic woman... characterised by direct address — a figure looks directly at the camera, at you, fixing you with its stare. This is not a subject "captured" on film, this is a subject who is capturing you: you are its other, through which it defines itself with a vengeance. This is a world where to perform is to control.”<sup>8</sup>

Blessing identifies the subjects performing gender in her selected photographs as being in roles of control gained from self-manipulation, presentation, and performance. This thesis is concerned with the performances addressed by Blessing, precisely for the reasons outlined by Butler. Performances of gender need not re-enact meaning that is socially established. As Blessing asserts, and as the work explored in, and created for this thesis exemplifies, gender performance can establish new meanings of gender through subversive acts. Furthermore, though this text focuses on the particularly theatrical performances of gender in music video, Butler also identifies subversive agency in the context of lived experience. Butler asserts, “Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Blessing, “Gender Performance in Photography,” in *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), 15.

dissonant and denaturalised performances that reveal the performative status of the natural itself.”<sup>9</sup> Butler notes the subversive potential of gender performance to expose the constructed nature of gender norms, and to establish “dissonant and denaturalised performances.” Importantly, these performances rely on neither documentation, nor audience. This is to clarify that the strategies identified in music video are not unique to the medium, though are utilised in the medium in unique ways worthy of close analysis.

Having established a view of gender performance—both its restrictive ability to constitute gender identities through repeated imitation, and its power to expose an alternative to those socially established norms—I will now elaborate on the queer, pro-sex, and third wave feminist perspectives that have informed the identification of subversive work. This section will be followed by a consideration of the value of subversive work, and how dramatic theory serves the study of these performances, with attention to specific strategies, and the dramatists who first cultivated them.

#### Queerness & Feminism

Jodie Taylor, author of *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World Making* (2012) qualifies queerness as, “resistance imbued with anti-assimilationist and deconstructionist rhetoric that aggressively opposes hegemonic identificatory and behavioural norms, including liberal lesbian and gay identity politics.”<sup>10</sup> This summarises a theoretical intention of queerness, with which I agree, though she further suggests that queerness can take many tangible and intangible forms: “a political or ethical approach, an aesthetic quality, a mode of interpretation or way of seeing, a perspective or orientation, or a way of desiring, identifying or disidentifying.”<sup>11</sup> This thesis considers one of these forms—queer aesthetics—the value of which is further suggested by José Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz claims, “Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer

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<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 200.

<sup>10</sup> Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World Making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.”<sup>12</sup> In this text, Munoz’s attention to the future derives from his claim that, “Queerness is not yet here.”<sup>13</sup> He envisions a queerness necessarily, permanently, on a horizon toward which we must continue to advance. However, the scope of this thesis is such that queer aesthetics explored in seminal works *do* forecast the queer worlds explored in contemporary videos. The queer aesthetics explored in this thesis resist the common framework of gender, but also offer, and affirm the queer possibility proposed by Munoz. I will now consider how a pro-sex feminist perspective informs the study and production of the work in this thesis, though the resistant and anti-assimilationist approach of these texts also situates them within queer discourse.

Though classic second wave feminist texts such as Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) have highlighted the importance of this project to destabilizing historically sexist frameworks, the feminist and queer literature which has been most crucial to this dissertation focuses less on the historic subordination of women and the queer community, and rather, focuses on cultivating agency through sexual provocation and self-possession. This text also identifies sexual representation as essential to disrupting heterosexist paradigms. For example, in *Right-Wing Women* (1983), Dworkin asserts that, “No woman needs intercourse; few can escape it.”<sup>14</sup> Dworkin relates to sex as an oppressive practice, situated within a heteronormative framework. This perspective is contrasted by the sentiments of Paul B. Preciado in *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics* (2008). Preciado draws from feminist music critic, Ellen Willis, summarizing that feminists who seek to abolish pornography, and other forms of female sexual representation make themselves complicit to the patriarchal structures in heterosexual society that repress and control women’s bodies.<sup>15</sup> Rather than participating in this historical policing of female bodies and sexuality, this thesis locates

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<sup>12</sup> José Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Son, 1983), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press at City University of New York, 2013), 338-339.

agency in the expression of sexuality, whose explicitness is interpreted as defiant, rather than complicit.

Though in this instance, like Dworkin's text, Preciado's point derives from a heterosexual, cisgender model, *Testo Junkie* also functions in a queer feminist capacity. In the text, Preciado documents their illegal consumption of testosterone as a sexed female. They describe filmed performances of drag and masturbation. This text proposes a pro-sex feminist view according to a re-evaluation of the agency available in sexual representation, and further highlights the importance of queer sexual representation to destabilizing the heterosexist frameworks which produced Dworkin's thinking. Importantly, Preciado's pro-sex, feminist perspective is partly drawn from a consideration of the various categories and subjectivities which feminism has come to encompass, and the utilisation of sexual representation to combat limiting norms.

In addition to sexual representation of an erotic nature, theorists considered in this text have also explored the value of representing sex in ways which calls into question the originality of gender. As I discussed in relation to Butler in the beginning of this section, gender functions as the effect of sex, and the perpetual imitation of the norms associated with sex. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Jack Halberstam promotes the disassociation of masculinity and femininity from maleness, and femaleness respectively. The book also exposes representational biases within the queer community, which reflect similar prejudices outside it. Halberstam asserts:

“Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site because it has been vilified by heterosexist and feminist/womanist programs alike; unlike male femininity which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received as by hetero and homo normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment as a longing to be and have a power that is always just out of reach.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 5.

Halberstam asserts that while the adoption of feminine aesthetics by sexed-males is accepted—in drag practices, for example—the appropriation of masculinity by sexed-females is perceived as a misidentification. This thesis explores both the erotic sexual representations explored by Preciado, and representations of sex which, as Halberstam advises, unhinge gendered aesthetics from the sex historically perceived as their origin.

Use of sexual representation, however, is not the only means for identifying queer and feminist work in this study. Halberstam, Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway have all approached feminism via the posthuman, which proposes an alternative to the binary model of gender.

For example, Donna Haraway positions her feminist perspective in relation to the figure of the cyborg in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). She sees the cyborg as implicating our capacity to construct our social realities. She asserts, “liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the apprehension of oppression, and so of possibility.”<sup>17</sup> She goes on to say that, “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world.”<sup>18</sup> What these claims propose is that constructive agency can be geared toward the production of alternative gender possibilities. As a non-human creation, the cyborg subverts sex, and destabilises norms.

However, Haraway also uses the cyborg to approach feminism in a way that questions the movement’s capacity to unify. Because the cyborg calls taxonomic categorisation into question, Haraway calls for unity based on, “affinity, conscious coalition, and political kinship,”<sup>19</sup> rather than identity. This thesis reinforces this project by including a scope of subjectivities whose identification as queer and feminist is signified by shared resistance to further marginalisation. That said, the intersectional approaches of some authors has also served to provide more nuanced interpretations of various objects of study—specifically, those by artists of color.

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<sup>17</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-Invention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 291.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

Examples of such authors include Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, who in the introduction to *Queer Black Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005) explains:

“As some theorists have noted, the deconstruction of binaries and the explicit ‘unmarking’ of difference (e.g.: gender, race, class, region, able-bodiedness, etc.) has serious implications for those for whom these other differences ‘matter’...To ignore the multiple subjectivities of the minoritarian subject within and without political movements and theoretical paradigms is not only politically and theoretically naive, but also potentially dangerous.”<sup>20</sup>

This passage highlights that, although queer and feminist projects can be constructed around the inclusionary approach explored by Haraway, this does not preclude attending to, or making visible, the differences among subjects, and their lived experiences within those projects. I will now touch briefly on the intersectional approach of this thesis, and how it seeks to acknowledge difference within an inclusionary queer and feminist frame.

Let me be clear: I do not mis-apprehend intersectional research as exclusively attentive to the intersections of blackness, gender, and sexuality. However, the difficulty I experienced in the initial two years of this research of finding music videos where artists of color were representing gender in subversive ways has been contrasted by the clear impact of Black Lives Matter on the production of queer and feminist work by black artists. As such, the period since the inception of Black Lives Matter, and the black artists working within it require focused research. Thus, though the perspective of this thesis is consistently intersectional, the third chapter of this text explores the intersections of blackness, feminism, queerness, and sexuality in dialogue with The Black Lives Matter movement. The works in this chapter have been chosen for the artists' expressions of queerness and feminism that are arguably sourced, and inseparable from their blackness, and participate in the activism of Black Lives Matter. Specifically, what separates these videos from other work included in

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<sup>20</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

the text (by artists of any race or culture) are the artists' literal enunciations of their physicality, and verbal, or visual references to the movement. In that chapter I also address the comparable lack of work by non-black artists of color, which subvert normative representations of gender.

To establish a foundation of intersectionality, specific to music video, upon which representation of gender and sexuality might be more closely analyzed throughout this text, I draw from Diane Railton, and Paul Watson's *Politics of Representation in Music Video* (2011), who assert:

"We argue that patterns of raced imagery that emerged from, and were consolidated in, Victorian discourses of colonialism and imperialism and which functioned historically to uphold and legitimate white privilege, continue to inform the very different ways in which black people and white people are represented in contemporary popular culture generally and music videos in particular. While the former are figured as essentially hyper sexual and inscribed in the *fact* of the black body itself, precisely the whiteness of the latter serves to license a more fluid relationship to the presentation of the sexualised body...race is not only deployed within music videos to delimit or sanction sexual behaviours; sex and gender also signify race in ways which in some situations, perhaps even in most, tends to reproduce and shore up existing hierarchical power relations, yet in others can be activated in such a way as to call those relations into question"<sup>21</sup>

There are a few key points to this passage that I hope will underscore my research. First, let me clarify that though Railton and Watson reference the racial divide produced during the "Victorian era in Britain," American artists included in this text can be seen as affected by

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<sup>21</sup>Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2011), 88.

similarly racially divisive histories and practices in America during the same timeframe.<sup>22</sup> Railton and Watson maintain that the white privilege produced from this divide licensed greater sexual presentation by white artists, than by artists of color. I argue that the same system of white privilege has also allowed white artists to be more prominent and successful in the music industry in general, thus making it difficult to identify whether white artists have produced more sexually expressive work than artists of color have, or whether the greater number of white artists in the mainstream further accounts for this imbalance of sexual imagery.

The authors also later suggest that sexual representation by white artists responds (or, corresponds, though such work is not the focus of this thesis) to a different system of restriction than sexual representations by artists of color do—specifically, a historically-rooted sexual conservatism. Of the work explored in this thesis, I have found that the most explicit, subversive, and perhaps intentionally shocking videos are those made by white artists. Examples include Brooke Candy's *Opulence* (2014), Madonna's *Erotica* (1992), and Nine Inch Nail's *Happiness in Slavery* (1992). Crucial to Railton and Watson's argument, however, is their assertion that the extremity of these sexual representations seems to be first, allowed by their whiteness, and second, and paradoxically only by this condition, made to separate their sexual identities, as drastically as possible, from paradigms of conservative, white, heteronormativity.

Conversely, much of the work by queer and feminist artists of color privileges the establishment of a respectability denied by the "hyper sexual" trope noted by Railton and Watson. Unlike the videos I have mentioned by white artists, there is a comparable lack of representation of, for example, direct sexual encounters, or subcultural aesthetics in work by artists of color. For example, despite TLC and Salt-N-Pepa expressing their sexuality in *Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg* (1992) and *Let's Talk About Sex* (1991), respectively, they do so through

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<sup>22</sup> I am referring here to the practices of slavery, whose prevalence in America from the early 1600s through 1865 coincided with the Victorian era (1837-1901), referenced by Railton and Watson.



messages about safe sex. They establish respect through their positions as informative sexual authorities, rather than available objects of desire.

Lastly, the authors suggest that gender can often act to signify race, and often reproduce or question existing hierarchies. The video examples above highlight this. The subversive actions taken by Madonna, TLC, and Salt-N-Pepa to sexually represent themselves have implications toward restructuring stereotypes produced from racial hierarchies. Though focused largely on feminism, queerness, and subversive performances of gender, it is the intention of this thesis to simultaneously destabilise the racial hierarches signified by the gender norms which these works seek to defy.

In the passages above, I having clarified how gender performance may be utilised to queer and feminist effect, and explored some of the queer and feminist theorists whose work has informed the selection of the objects of study. Before considering the value of interpreting queer and feminist performances of gender in dialogue with dramatic theory, I will first establish the significance of subversion—what I mean when I identify it, and why I consider it a potent mode of resistance.

### Subversion

Roland Barthes observed in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980) that, “Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises but when it is pensive, when it thinks.”<sup>23</sup> Georges Bataille offered that, “subversion seeks immediately to create its own values in order to oppose established values.”<sup>24</sup> As Barthes and Bataille suggest, subversion is an oppositional replacement of some traditionally established entity. Acts of subversion encourage us to think about the confines of what we know, and challenge those restrictions. As a mode of opposition and critique, I see subversion—by conventional definition, and as explored in the above quotes—as having a specifically generative, or productive quality. Subversion has proven to be a variable which delineates a static gendered image found in a

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<sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 33.

video aimed to entertain, and to promote the song for which it was made, and an image whose intention is to threaten that stasis through the interruption of, what Butler calls a, “stylised repetition of acts”<sup>25</sup> —i.e.: how we physically, psychically, and *continually* communicate our genders, based on how we have learned to do so.

It is difficult to pinpoint what makes something subversive. It is not the project of subversion to protest a problem—in this case, antiquated gender norms, which continue to dictate our social behaviors, and are continually represented in popular visual media—through its direct enunciation, or denunciation. Nowhere in this thesis will we see images of rallies or signage explicitly calling for “gender equality now,” or “equal rights for women.” We *will* see images of masculine, tough, hyper-sexual women; of glamorous, effeminate, androgynous men; and images of monsters, aliens, and robots that very intentionally defy sexual categories.

Subversive images replace problematic (sexist, heterosexist, homophobic) images gracefully and silently. They show the ease of dispelling traditional images, and creating new roles. They demonstrate how quickly the repetition of the act of gender can be interrupted. The power of what is being replaced is also effectively denied in this respect, through its lack of acknowledgement. As an example, in *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that drag, “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity.”<sup>26</sup> Drag makes the subversive replacement of what is perceived as a fixed expression of gender through a new image, or performance of it. In other words, the performance of femininity by a sexed male subverts the notion of masculinity being produced by maleness. Butler concludes the book by saying:

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

“the task is not whether to repeat [a performance of gender], but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.”<sup>27</sup>

I argue the images that shall be discussed hereto, accomplish this as subversive acts, and that the genre of music video is precisely the location where a 'radical proliferation of gender' occurs. I have established above what gender performance is, its subversive potential, and why subversion is a strategy worthy of consideration in this thesis. I will now elaborate on why dramatic discourse has proved a relevant lens for observing subversive gender performance in music video.

#### Dramatic Theory

Music video operates as a site for conventional performance, though there are discrepancies between the medium, the performances of gender observed within them, and the more typical theatrical forms around which much of the dramatic discourse considered in this study was formed. In light of these discrepancies, I will clarify how dramatic discourse has served to interpret these works.

Philip Auslander, author of *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), would likely disagree with my approach. He argues that, “at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners.”<sup>28</sup> He goes on to draw from actor and writer, Eric Bogosian in locating the value of typical theatrical form. He explains, “Bogosian’s perception of the value of live performance clearly derives from its existence only in the moment (every time it happens).”<sup>29</sup> Auslander might argue that the uniquely *live* element of theatre would prevent its analysis being applied to the highly edited visuals which are constructed from numerous takes of the same performance in music video.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4.

However, I argue that dramatic theory is crucial to the interpretation of these objects of study for several reasons. The theorists I have considered in my analysis also work within subversive frameworks. Theorists such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht—whose approaches I will clarify below—sought to subvert the theatrical traditions of producing false narratives for entertainment. Their strategies specifically guide performance toward the provocation of thought and shock in the audience. These theorists supported the interrogation of safe social conventions, via performance. When utilised to queer and feminist effect in music video, these strategies situate the falsity of gender norms on the same, vulnerable ground. Because the fundamental viewing experience of watching music video does not prevent the identification of these strategies, I argue their effects also translate with equal facility across genres of performance.

The study of pop performance in dramatic discourse is further supported by performance scholar, Richard J. Gray II, who applies performance theory to the work of pop artist, Lady Gaga. Gray reinforces the application of dramatic theory toward pop performance via the work of performance scholar, Richard Schechner. In his text, *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga* (2012), Gray categorises Lady Gaga’s work according to what Schechner identifies as a key element of performance: “performance’s subject [is] transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become— for worse or better— what they ordinarily are not.”<sup>30</sup> What I find most significant about this passage is the ability Schechner notes for human beings to “create themselves.” I view the selves and genders created at the site of music video as having the potential to signal transformation outside of a performative context. Schechner, unlike Auslander would likely support this study of gender performance in music video in consideration of this effect on its audience. It is of note that Schechner does not stipulate that this transformative effect is only available in conventional theatrical settings, or, as I considered above in relation to Jennifer Blessing’s description of gender performance, when a camera, or audience is present to document the performance. Rather, Schechner suggests we, “study performance and performative

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

behaviours in all their various genres, contexts, expressions, and historical processes.”<sup>31</sup> I reiterate that identifying subversive strategies in music video, as in other media, is crucial to establishing agency with which to dismantle hegemonic frameworks. As previously mentioned, these strategies do not rely on specific contexts of performance, and as Schechner suggests above, all contexts of performance provide an arena of study.

### Dramatists

Before introducing key theorists, whose work has been identified in the objects of study, I will touch briefly on why some influential dramatists are absent from this text. As I mentioned above, the performance theorists whose work has informed the interpretation of gender subversion in music video have also been similarly concerned with performative subversion. Several dramatic thinkers whose work, in contrast, has focused on conventional performances of characters, and audience entertainment, rather than other forms of critical engagement, were necessarily precluded from this thesis. Examples of such figures include Konstantin Stanislavski who is known for his eponymous “system” of character development,<sup>32</sup> and Lee Strasberg, who, based on Stanislavsky’s teaching, founded “method”<sup>33</sup> acting.<sup>34</sup> There are also examples of modern dramatists whose utilisation of subversive performance was tailored toward addressing a specific social concern, and therefore applies less to this thesis’ focus on gender performance.

For example, Jerzy Grotowski, another highly influential modern dramatist who modeled his work after Stanislavski, diverted from conventional performance formats. But, his strategies are not identifiable in the works considered in this text. Lisa Wolford outlines some of those strategies below:

“First, that powerful acting occurs at a meeting place of the personal and the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>33</sup> This strategy does not draw on one’s own emotional memory to perform a role, but rather commits the self to literal *becoming* of the character.

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, 14.

archetypal—in this he continued and deepened the work of Stanislavsky. Second, that the most effective theatre is poor theatre—one with a minimum of accoutrements beyond the presence of the actors. Third, that theatre is intercultural, differentiating, and relating performance ‘truths’ in and from many cultures.”<sup>35</sup>

Beyond his concerns for character and acting, Grotowski’s minimalist strategies contradict much of the works in this text, which utilise highly theatrical aesthetics, scenes, and sets to produce subversive images. I do consider many of the works explored in this text to be intercultural, though they tend to fuse cultures from within a Western context. Beyoncé marries images of contemporary, American, southern, black, street culture, with depictions of Louisiana’s Antebellum period. In *Wavvy* (2012), Mykki Blanco transitions from making drug deals in downtown Manhattan in masculine dress, to dancing in feminine dress, among others in formal evening wear, at an uptown party. As will also be noted in the third chapter, this research produced limited findings outside western contexts where gender was subverted in music video through queer and feminist performances.

Though Augusto Boal adapted subversive strategies toward the combat of social oppression in what he called, “Theatre of the Oppressed,” a significant aspect of his approach involved audience participation. Boal explains, “I believe that all the truly revolutionary groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilise them.”<sup>36</sup> Audience participation could perhaps be organised as part of the experience of viewing a music video, though I have not observed any examples where an artist suggested that their viewers take participatory action to utilise theatrical means of production, as Boal advises.

In Richard Schechner’s text, *Performance Theory* (1988), the author considers the subversive processes of The Living Theater, founded in New York by Judith Malina and her husband, Julien Beck. Schechner refers to a Living Theatre production, *Paradise Now* (1968), calling

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Wolford, “Ariadne’s Thread,” in *The Grotowski Sourcebook* ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria Odilia Leal-McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 1979), 122.

it, “very well-organised if one recognises diversion, disruption, and side-tripping as part of its organisation.”<sup>37</sup> Malina and Beck were pacifist anarchists, that approached theatre as a tool for social change. Despite their commitment to upheaval and systemic exposure, I have observed no distinguishable moments in the objects of study where the performance relies on the experimentation of theatrical form to the extent that The Living Theatre did. The performance Schechner mentions was six hours long, and involved audience participation culminating in a confrontation of police at its end.<sup>38</sup> The subversive strategies in the objects of study are derived from how gender is presented in the medium, rather than how the medium format is manipulated toward queer and feminist ends. However, this particular vantage is one considered by Robin Roberts, whose focus on the postmodern form of music video as a feminist tool will be discussed later in the text.

I have briefly addressed the exemption of several dramatists here, who are either commonly associated with theatrical study, such as Stanislavsky and Strasberg, or associated with performance which seeks a social commentary and re-structuring, such as Grotowsky, Boal, Malina, and Beck. This analysis is not meant to be exhaustive, but to situate the approach of this research, and to provide examples of structures which neither this thesis, nor the objects of study adapt, despite sharing somewhat similar intentions. I would also like to note that in similar ways as the above thinkers’ interest in subverting dramatic tradition makes them a precarious omission to this text, the focus on subsequent dramatists’ strategies admittedly fails to capture the theoretical range across which their work applies. This text will not adequately explore the political foundations and Communist threads of Bertolt Brecht’s life and work, for example. Instead, this text identifies, and credits specific theatrical strategies whose appropriation in music video has been fundamental to establishing the subversive potential of gender performance. I will now explore those thinkers whose strategies of subversion have been identified in the works considered in this text, and explain their respective contributions to the interpretation of the objects of study.

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 52.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

### Artaud

Dramatic theorist, Antonin Artaud's confrontational and provocative work has served as a vital lens for identifying acts of subversion in music video. In his book *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), Artaud asserts that, "Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt."<sup>39</sup> Artaud promotes aggressive performances that shake their viewer from complacent acceptance of the fictitious reality presented to them. Susan Sontag echoes this in her essay, "Approaching Artaud" (1976) by examining, "From the mid-nineteen-twenties on, Artaud's work is animated by the idea of a radical change in culture."<sup>40</sup> She explains that Artaud conceived of performance as "an ordeal,"<sup>41</sup> and notes that members of the audience were not meant to, "leave the theater 'intact' morally or emotionally."<sup>42</sup> As these Sontag passages highlight, Artaud does not suggest physical, but rather psychological, or intellectual violence. He saw shock as a tool for cultural change. The works explored in this dissertation have been chosen for their "cruel" and brave Artaudian performances, which attack the static confines of gender roles through visual experimentation. The aesthetics used to employ those attacks may be unnatural, surreal, opulent, or even grotesque. The intention to provoke thought through radical invention and displacement is the backbone of subversion that we shall find manifests in a myriad of visual ways.

I would like to acknowledge that the study of gender performance and sexual representation is a somewhat ironic, though perhaps most appropriate Artaudian study. David A. Shafer, author of *Antonin Artaud* (2016) observes, "Artaud obsessed over sex. He suffered an almost pathological fear of sex."<sup>43</sup> Sontag affirms this in the following passage:

"Artaud regarded eroticism as something threatening, demonic. In 'Art and Death' he describes 'this preoccupation with sex which petrifies me and rips out my blood.'

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<sup>39</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 85.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Sontag, "Approaching Artaud," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 42.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> David A. Shafer, *Antonin Artaud* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 65.



Sexual organs multiply on a monstrous, Brobdingnagian scale and in menacingly hermaphrodite shapes in many of his writings; virginity is treated as a state of grace...<sup>44</sup>

This obsessive fear of sex and eroticism noted by Shafer and Sontag draws significantly from Artaud's misogyny. Shafer points to the following excerpt from Artaud's collection of poems, *Nerve Scales* (1968) as an example of his contempt for female sexuality:

“Just like all women, you judge with your clitoris, not with your mind... Besides you have only ever judged me by my external appearance, like all women, like all idiots do, while my inner soul is the most damaged, the most ruined.”<sup>45</sup>

His reference to the woman's judgement being sourced from her clitoris, rather than her mind both denigrates her sexuality, and positions that sexuality as a threat to her intelligence. Two considerations must be drawn from Artaud's fearful relationship with sex, and the misogynistic attitude expressed above. First, though Artaud condemns sex, there is an irony at play in his promotion of provocative work that has the potential to produce feelings of discomfort that mirror his feelings toward sex. Given his own affected response to sexuality, sexual imagery would seem to represent the visual material most valuable to his approach. Secondly, this attitude makes the reading of Artaud's strategies in queer and feminist work even more pertinent. The works explored in this text appropriate the agency drawn from provocative performance that, given Artaud's sexist language, might otherwise be conflated with misogynistic practices. By identifying Artaudian strategy in queer and feminist works this thesis locates subversive agency which can be applied toward the dismantling of gendered frameworks, while also confronting Artaud's misogyny with his own strategies.

In her essay on Artaud, Sontag asserts that, “Brecht is the century's only other writer on the theater whose importance and profundity conceivably rival Artaud's.”<sup>46</sup> This brings me to the

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<sup>44</sup> Sontag, “Approaching Artaud,” 27.

<sup>45</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 124-5.

<sup>46</sup> Sontag, “Approaching Artaud,” 42.

analysis on Bertolt Brecht, whose theatrical strategies have also been essential to establishing queer and feminist agency in music video.

### Brecht

Though Artaud's broader attention to shock underscores the approach of many of the objects of study, Brecht's strategies can be pointed to more acutely. Developed throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, Brecht's "Epic Theatre" was above all, aware of itself as theatre. Brecht maintained, "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [Epic Theater]; the engendering of illusion."<sup>47</sup> His aim was to acknowledge and expose the construction of performance, without sacrificing intellectual engagement, and meaning. Rather than identifying with fictional characters, performers could be used to illuminate unseen social realities through bodily sign and symbol. This applies to the objects of study, which expose gender as performance through their extreme and unconventional gendered representations. By exposing the manipulation of gender at an extreme level, common iterations of gender performance also come into view. Walter Benjamin echoes how Brecht's strategy might be applied to this effect in *Understanding Brecht* (1998). Benjamin asserts, "Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions is brought about through processes being interrupted."<sup>48</sup> In the context of these videos, what is interrupted is the "stylised repetition of acts"—to draw again from Butler—which conventionally constitute gender.

The modes of interruption performed in the videos explored in this thesis also frequently produce critical distance—a strategy written into the Epic Theatre. Originally adapted from Chinese Theater, "alienation effect," or "distancing effect"—or, "Verfremdungseffekt" in Becht's German tongue—is explained by Brecht in the following passage:

"The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with

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<sup>47</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 122.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso Books, 1998), 4-5.

the characters in a play. The production took the subject matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding."<sup>49</sup>

In this passage, Brecht emphasises the development of an audience's consciousness through an independence from empathy. This approach emerged via O'Dell in relation to masochism in the preface. Masochism is further explored in chapter two in consideration Nine Inch Nail's video, *Happiness in Slavery* (1992). As I will discuss later, the video serves as an example where the performance, and inclusion of masochism provided critical distance to the audience through subcultural sex practices. As was also noted in the preface, however, distancing effect does not rely on masochism. Other modes of distancing are explored in the work of Beyoncé in chapter three, for example. In this context, Beyoncé distances a white audience to call attention to the renewed racial politics of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

#### Butler

I will conclude this section by briefly returning to Butler, to highlight her advocacy of subversive strategies of gender performance to destabilise normative frameworks. Butler does not define where, or how these strategies must be organised, which in turn highlights the value of identifying acts and strategies of subversion in music video.

Butler ultimately attributes the production of the gender binary to a normalisation of heterosexuality. She maintains that, "the heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female."<sup>50</sup> These "expressive attributes" of masculinity and femininity perpetuate a heterosexual model upon which procreation relies. This heterosexist structure reaffirms itself through gender's performative effect, which Butler describes below:

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<sup>49</sup> Brecht, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

“Performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.”<sup>51</sup>

In this passage, Butler highlights that gender produces the masculinity and femininity that it anticipates as an external expression of a self that is perceived to be internally sexed. She maintains that gender is sustained through repeated, ritualistic performance, which acts upon our own understanding, and experience of masculinity, and femininity. In the following passage Butler questions how this system may be destabilised:

“How then to expose the causal lines as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications, and to engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effects of drag, whose subversive possibilities ought to be played and replayed to make the “sex” of gender into a site of insistent political play?”<sup>52</sup>

This passage expresses Butler’s desire to expose the fabrications of gender. Like Artaud and Brecht, she seeks to reveal the theatrical frameworks which have perpetuated a static acceptance of a fictional performance. Butler calls the fabrication of gender “inevitable,” but suggests that gender’s fabrication must reveal the construction of masculinity and femininity, and corrupt the notion that these attributes having a sexed origin from which they are naturally produced. She suggests “playing,” and “replaying” subversive possibilities, as I argue the work explored in this text does.

Lastly, Butler also claims that, “As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 29.

historically specific sets of relations.”<sup>53</sup> Though I argue that the performances of gender in music video do play and replay subversive possibilities to expose the construction of gender, I argue these strategies must be read, as Butler suggests, in relation to the culturally and historically specific points at which their meaning converges. In addition to interpreting performances of gender in music video via performance theory, I will now explain a secondary frame, which seeks to contextualise the subversive intentions of the work according to the period in which it was produced.

## II: Conjunctural Aesthetics

Through the process of this research, visual trends emerged, which highlighted how performative strategies of queer and feminist subversion responded to, and participated in the crises, or conditions of the period in which they were produced. The contextual legibility of those strategies has informed the organisation of this text around what cultural theorist, Stuart Hall calls “conjunctures.” Hall defines a conjuncture as, “a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape.”<sup>54</sup> He further stipulates how conjunctural analysis affords a re-consideration of historical narrative:

“As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or as Louis Althusser sees it, ‘fuse in ruptural unity.’”<sup>55</sup>

As outlined by Hall above, conjunctures are not defined by a particular amount of time, but are indicated by cultural rupture, and characterise an inter-woven set of cultural conditions. This text makes the conjunctural analysis of the three periods since MTV began, whose production of queer and feminist strategies of gender subversion in music video respond most identifiably to cultural rupture: the AIDS crisis, the advent of the internet, and the Black

<sup>53</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, “Interpreting the Crisis,” *Soundings: A Journal of Culture and Politics*, 44 (2010): 57.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Lives Matter movement. I recognise that since 1981 there have been several cultural crises which these frames do not address; environmental issues, and war conflicts are perhaps most notable among those absences. However, such crises produced comparably less queer and feminist work in response. Though a comprehensive analysis of cultural events since 1981 cannot be made, this approach is necessary to contextualise acts of subversion, consider how agency is utilised, and how methods of subversion change in response to cultural conditions. This approach also firmly situates this work within the study of Visual Cultures, for its consideration of precisely how culture represents and addresses its conditions in visual ways. Though the specific conditions that shaped these periods of study will be explored within each chapter, I will give a brief overview of how this text has been organised.

As will later be highlighted in the review of music video literature, artists and scholars grappled with the medium's form during the early years of MTV. The AIDS epidemic was the first crisis to which the still-burgeoning medium would be able to respond. The first chapter, "Protection and Provocation During the AIDS Crisis" observes the aesthetics and advocacy that congealed in the medium by the mid-1980s. In this chapter I explore videos whose handling of the queer body confronts the reprehensible silence of an era when sex and sexuality were consciously tied to death and shame. This manifested visually in attempts to protect the body from disease and social stigma, to provoke conservatives, and in macabre and morbid sexual aesthetics, likely representative of the pervasive threat of illness. Acts of "protection" can be seen in the promotion of "safe sex," in the videos by cisgender female rappers, Salt-N-Pepa and TLC. I will also compare Madonna's most sexually charged videos made in promotion of her album, *Erotica* (1992), with those of industrial rock band, Nine Inch Nails, who used similarly dark aesthetics from BDSM subculture in their video work.

In the second chapter, "Gender Proliferation, Marriage Equality, and the Internet," I explore a scope of gender identities in the contemporary landscape of music video. In this chapter I also consider how this project has been accommodated by post-internet shifts in modes of production, distribution, and regulation. Changing norms of gender and sexuality evidenced by the legalisation of same sex marriage in the United States and the United Kingdom are also examined as a contributing factor to the production of queer and feminist work.

The final chapter, “Performance and Ownership of Queer Black Feminism” examines the intersection of queerness and feminism with blackness, in work produced since the inception of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012. I will explore black feminist work by artists such as Solange, videos by black queer artists such as Zebra Katz, and Cakes da Killa, and make an in-depth analysis of various black feminist discourses which may be culled from Beyoncé's controversial video for *Formation* (2016).

In the sections above I have outlined the research of this thesis by defining and exploring the subversive potential of gender performance, by elaborating which queer, feminist, and performance theorists have informed the selection of the work, and why this text has been organised according to periods when the works were produced. I will now explore the methodology of this thesis, before providing an overview of existing music video discourse in order to highlight the gap this research fills within it.

### **Methodology**

This thesis takes a critical and practical approach to considering its research questions. As a practice-based research student I see my current practice, and my history as a performer as the foundation from which my questions and interests have developed. I simply would not have arrived at this research were I not first a practicing artist, with what I imagine to be similar artistic intentions as many of the subjects in my dissertation. I will reiterate what I identify those intentions to be: to subvert gender norms for the purpose of dismantling their limiting social roles and expectations.

Though my live performance was what initially engaged me with these concerns, my attention has turned to music video—both for written research, and as another way of addressing these themes in my practice. After our band dissolved in 2010, I began a solo music project. I moved from Seattle to New York, and found making music videos, and sharing them via websites such as YouTube, and Vimeo to be a way of allowing continued access to my performance practice to a fan base which was largely based on the west coast. As Railton and Watson point out, “music video’s association with television may well turn

out to be a pre-historical anomaly, a prototypical blip in the development of the form.”<sup>56</sup> This also relates to my interests in the changing landscape of music video circulation and censorship, which artists, and specifically independent artists such as myself, now have more significant control over. In the post-internet shift away from MTV as the predominant source for music video distribution and consumption, websites such as YouTube and Vimeo have afforded independent, and emerging artists new occasion to create and display music video—a medium that was historically relegated to a few television stations, and produced almost exclusively by major label artists with sizeable budgets. Because my own creative work is indeed a product of this shift, much of this research is also relevant to informing my own video practice.

Through the production of music video, I tapped into significant images with which to visually communicate. I considered how video might also enhance my live show by accessing thematically suggestive images, which would otherwise not be available in a live setting (multiple costume and set changes, for example, being prohibitively difficult to achieve in a conventional club performance setting).

The works that comprise the practice portion of my doctorate are what developed into video projections whose incorporation in live performances produces music videos in real time. I have created a subversive lexicon of images, whose themes enhance my live show, and are shared with the works studied in my dissertation. These works also echo elements of Brecht's Epic Theatre, which has informed various observations made on performances throughout this text. In *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (1957) Brecht explains his use of projections:

"A big canvas at the back of the stage was used for the projection of texts and pictorial documents which remained throughout the scene, so that this screen was also virtually part of the setting. Thus, the stage not only used allusions to show actual rooms but also texts and pictures to show the great movement of ideas in which the

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<sup>56</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 149.



events were taking place. The projections are in no way pure mechanical aids on the sense of being extras, they are no *pons asinorum*; they do not set out to help the spectator but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away. They turn the impact into an *indirect* one."<sup>57</sup>

I use projections in a similar way as Brecht suggests, but to different effect. A white screen for the projections is used live. These pieces visually explore the themes in my dissertation of gender as performance, and strive for moments of thought provoking subversion. Echoing Brecht's passage, I attempt to show a range of ideas complementing the live performance. Less like Brecht, however, I do not aim to "block" the viewer. I make no attempt to dictate whether, or to what extent, the viewer may empathise with my performance.

Though these works may resemble video, or performance art practices, what I argue separates them from much of the work in this genre, is that they are not meant to be viewed without a soundtrack, and that the nature of that soundtrack aligns them closely with an expansion of the music video format. Importantly, in the portfolio submitted for this thesis, my music has been added to the series to simulate the videos' live presentation. In *Visualising Music: Audio-Visual Relationships in Avant-Garde Film and Video Art* (2010), Holly Rogers both asserts that, "avant-garde film is impossible to define,"<sup>58</sup> and yet, that its score is essential to its definition:

"Most mainstream film experienced without its music still succeeds—its narratives remain coherent, its illusion of reality, although perhaps weakened, are still complete; avant-garde film on the other hand, fails without its soundtrack."<sup>59</sup>

In the quotes above, Rogers asserts the ambiguity of the avant-garde, and clarifies the importance of the soundtrack to shaping the work. Similarly, I argue that my videos' pairing with pop music's unsubversive structure prevents them from achieving the avant-garde

<sup>57</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 57-58.

<sup>58</sup> Holly Rogers, *Visualising Music: Audio-Visual Relationships in Avant-Garde Film and Video Art* (Amsterdam: Lambert, 2010), 46.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

totality that performance artists might. Performance artists such as Marina Abramovic or Carolee Schneemann transgressed the boundaries of visual arts by exploring the body as work, which in turn bore exponential implications about the female body—from its visibility, and commodification, to its strength, and standing within a burgeoning awareness of the complexity of subjectivity and representation. Certainly the nudity of Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-76), which saw the artist suspended naked, making marks with a crayon on the white surface below her; or the violence of Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974), where the artist was confronted with a loaded gun (which she had provided) by an audience member share similar Artaudian intentions as my own work. However, the soundtrack of my work activates them within a drastically different artistic context, and questions the boundary of music video rather than performance, or visual art.

I assert that my videos rely on a soundtrack, and that because that soundtrack is identifiably pop in its sound and structure, the production of this work signals an expansion of the medium of music video much more significantly than any contribution it might make to the canon of performance art. This experimentation with the borders of the medium is not something unique to my practice, but it is crucial to establish in relation to other mediums. Similar strategies are addressed by music video scholar, Carol Vernallis, who considers the deterioration of boundaries of what constitutes a music video in her book, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (2013). Vernallis explains:

"genre's influences ripple out maddeningly, creating interference, blendings, loosening of boundaries in ways we've never seen. Beyoncé's music video *Countdown* looks like a YouTube clip, as does Lana Del Rey's *Video Games*. Segments from... Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe* could be placed on YouTube and inadvertently experienced as music videos, prosumers' mashups, art students' class projects, or trailers... [All these media] have been influenced by the same technologies and socio-economic pressures."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-4.

Vernallis' research suggests that in light of the rise of homemade videos, whose aesthetics have also been adopted by established performers, and the sprawl of work with any considerable type of soundtrack, that new marriages of sound and image now constitute music video. Vernallis concludes, “We might thus define music video, simply and perhaps too broadly, as a relation of sound and image that we recognise as such.”<sup>61</sup> Though my work could stand alone as video or performance art, it has always been made with the intention of accompanying a soundtrack in a live setting, and thus part of this evolution of the medium of music video.

This confusion of boundaries is one that I embrace, and that I identify as broadly symptomatic of contemporary shifts in technological production. I will however, address the critique of the kind of visual pairing I make in my work, made by Auslander in an interview with *Performance Paradigm*:

“Different media do not interact with one another as equals. I said in [*Liveness*], if you have live bodies and projections on the same stage, most people are going to look at the projections. This is partly a perceptual matter: the projected images are usually larger and brighter and therefore attract more attention. But it also has to do with the cultural dominance of the screened image at this historical moment.”<sup>62</sup>

I share neither the certainty, nor the fear that Auslander expresses in this quote. I am not certain that projections divert attention from live bodies in any damaging way, nor do I fear this diversion of attention. Auslander himself concedes on this matter:

“Some people have disputed this point with me, arguing that there are multiple possible relationships among live bodies and electronic media in performance and that the balance of power between them can shift at different moments. I agree that there can be moments in a multimedia production in which all attention is focused on

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<sup>61</sup> Carol Vernallis, “Music Video’s Second Aesthetic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 438.

<sup>62</sup> Philip Auslander, *Performance Paradigm*, E-Interview, March, 2005, <http://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/8>.

a live body and other moments when that body all but disappears into a digital image.”<sup>63</sup>

Auslander acknowledges his critics, but only goes as far as to say that attention may be exchanged between the images, rather than shared with both at the same time, in equal measure. As I previously mentioned, I do not share Auslander’s fear of this dominance of the screened image, or rather, to me the value of what the projected image builds is worth the potential risk proposed by Auslander. In her article, “Staging the Image: Video in Contemporary Performance” (2009), Patricia Milder echoes this stance:

“In our technology-saturated visual environment, the question is not whether video will be used in performance (it will), or whether this is a trend that may pass (like ever-expanding online culture, it won’t), but rather, how savvy performers and directors can use moving images to create powerful, visually interesting, critical, or otherwise fresh and authentic works on stage.”<sup>64</sup>

Milder draws the marriage of performance and video back to technology’s role in our visual environment as the source of this new presentation. This relates back to the cultivation of my own visual practice via YouTube, as I explored earlier. This relationship to technology will also be further examined in chapter two, alongside the objects of study whose subversive strategies also rely on technology. I will now elaborate on the relationship between my practical and critical research.

My critical research is continually valuable to cultivating and understanding my own work, and how I communicate. Images with personal resonance as socially provocative typically act as my point of entry for elaborating questions and ideas into chapters and new works.

My creative process involves making various drafts of work by documenting ideas through photography and video. These are saved to a private, password-protected website. These drafts allow me to visually experiment, often searching to understand how constructions of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Milder, "Staging the Image: Video in Contemporary Performance," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 31.3 (2009): 108-119.

gender are made, what my own perceptions of masculine, feminine, or androgynous representations are, and how these borders are navigated visually.

I am also interested in established, gendered “characters,” with historically defined costumes and roles, such as “Bride” and “Widow.” By creating these characters, I have also been considerate of the gendered aesthetics of the spaces in which I insert them; for instance, exploring the effects of filming a woman in a gown in a masculine study, a masculine female character in a highly feminine space, or a feminine character who subverts the femininity of the room’s interior with erratic, physical, historically “un-feminine” behavior. I have also chosen sets and locations in my series where the idea of masculine and feminine aesthetics is reflected in man-made and natural settings (flowers baring a more feminine connotation perhaps, than a fortified stone house)—identifying how we have laid our own gendered narrative on our surroundings. This process of performing and making video, unlike my written research process, allows me to explore the performative nature of gender, to manipulate identity through performance, and in turn, to try to find modes of provoking an audience into re-considering their own relationships and attractions to these archetypes, and their surroundings.

These visual “drafts” culminate in a series of videos, which I edit into a single composite to use as a projection during live performances. The series, *Swallower* (2014), is intended to provoke thoughts of the traditionally gross or classless act of swallowing semen in a sexual context. I explore this idea as it relates to “swallowing” in other metaphorical senses: swallowing pride, shame, or fear, and trying to emerge stronger from the experience. I am also trying to deflect the associations this act bares to disgust onto the experience of *feeling* swallowed: when we take on more than we can handle, feel compromised, or that defeat may be imminent. The images of *Swallower*, and of *Promises* (2016) explore ritual iconography from wedding, funerals, and suggest alternative binding practices between queer subjects. The series, *Roses* (2015), united by a feminine, yet violent red tint throughout, pairs feminine iconography with subversive scenes of gender performance by cisgender women. Images of blood, and flowers are paired with scenes of motherhood, ambiguous sexual encounters

between women, and abstract movements suggesting unity and care amongst female subjects. In *Dust I* (2016) and *Dust II* (2016), seminal works of earth art are appropriated as stage for feminist performance.

Ultimately, my practice takes an active role in trying to answer the questions posed by my research, and does so visually and subjectively rather than in empirical dialogue with other scholars. While I identify modes of subversion in others' works, I am also consistently drawn back to my own intentions to actively undo the limitations of gender. My video practice allows me to consider how this might be done, not only as it relates to my personal experience, as a woman, and how that took shape as singer of a band, but through continued performance of a broader range of roles and character interactions.

Per my objects of study, I work with the archive of music videos, which is accessible online through sites such as [imvdb.com](http://imvdb.com) (Internet Music Video Database), YouTube, and MTV's online archive. At present, I estimate that I have viewed over 3,000 videos. I tend to note videos whose gender representations are challenging or extravagant, or perhaps where characters are put in unexpected scenarios for their genders, or alternative desires are expressed. Examples of this might include Lady Gaga's androgynous characters in white latex, bondage suits in *Bad Romance* (2009), Bjork's biomorphic representation as a sea anemone in *Unravel* (2003), or the homoerotic lust explored in a slow, voyeuristic car chase through suburbia in SSION's *Earthquake* (2012). I have focused on the aesthetic and thematic progressions of both the medium at large, as well as in the video canons of individual artists whose work has been historically laden with subversive images of gender, such as Madonna, Lady Gaga, Mykki Blanco, Le1f, and Bjork. Once I identify a thread between similar works, I consider how these might be relevant to a specific period, or social movement.

Though this research is highly interdisciplinary, including a video practice, and delving into a medium that could not exist without the music it must represent, this is predominantly an investigation of the visual. The key interest in gendered representation by subjects within

queer and feminist cultures, as well as how the objects of study produced then fit within, or against their historical context, or popular culture at large reaffirms this dissertation's place in the study of Visual Cultures.

Admittedly, there is an interdependent relationship between sound and image in the genre; and frequently visual themes and editing styles are prescribed by lyrical or musical content (the video for *Vogue* by Madonna serves as a prime example). Where relevant to the images of the video, those elements will certainly be discussed, however, we will also explore many works where a song may not seem of equal caliber, or relevant thematic content to this research as the video made to advertise it. Though this approach is not one that her research habitually takes, music video scholar Carol Vernallis explores its value below:

“A broader picture of music video may require a new model. Because music videos place song and image in a relation of copresence, I suggest that we consider them as partners: we might sit them on the couch and imagine them in couple's therapy. As analysts, we might consider each spouse in turn. What kinds of behavior does this persona exhibit, what attitudes, dispositions, traits, and ways of functioning? In what ways is each able to listen to or shoulder the requests of the other? Are there examples of pushing and shoving, stifling, or mutual admiration? Asking each to articulate needs in classic therapeutic language is not too farfetched.”<sup>65</sup>

Vernallis uses the colloquial example of “couples therapy” as a model for how we might interpret music video's two fundamental components separately. This thesis focuses on how the visual apparatus of the medium has fostered significant and subversive representations of gender whose frequent independence from immediate thematic concerns of the song should not preclude their investigation. It draws on an un-studied archive of contemporary work, and explores how this popular medium makes radical attacks on gendered and bodily

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<sup>65</sup> Vernallis, “Music Video's Second Aesthetic,” 439-440.

representation and norms. As Vernallis flippantly suggests, “Perhaps sync only needs to be good enough, and then music and image can each independently go about its business.”<sup>66</sup>

Before proceeding to the analysis of music videos, I will now review existing literature, to situate my own approach within it. This section gives an overview of the development of research on sexual representation in music video. This cannot be an exhaustive account of the literature, though should help to highlight the gap in queer and feminist research which this thesis seeks to address.

### **Background**

Music Television (MTV) launched in 1981, establishing music videos as objects of cultural and arts research. This section reviews some of that early research to provide a context of how the medium and its discourse approached sexual representation. Much of the literature produced in the first decade of music video’s mass production and distribution grappled with it as an exploding social phenomenon, and expressed a desire to understand the medium in the most basic terms. What was it? Was it advertisement or art? Who was watching, and how often? What were the recurring visual themes? Many of these initial queries manifested in fairly clinical analyses that took qualitative inventory of images with limited interpretation. They deduced from percentages and ratios, the various problems of representation that still plague the medium: white men dominated over their female counterparts, there was a disturbing amount of dramatised violence, and representations of racial minorities played into the negative stereotyping thereof. Examples of such studies include Jane Brown and Kenneth Campbell’s “Race and Gender in Music Videos: The Same Beat but a Different Drummer” (1986), and Gary Burns and Robert Thompson’s “Music, Television and Video: Historical and Aesthetic Considerations” (1987). Barry Sherman and Joseph Dominick’s “Violence and Sex in Music Videos: TV and Rock ‘n’ Roll” (1986) covers similar ground, though their work is of some note in relation to this dissertation for their interest in instances where transvestitism, homosexuality, bondage, and voyeurism were represented—areas which have proved greater sources of subversive imagery for their confrontation of sexual

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 445.



norms. Though similarly representative of the nascent nature of music video research, Richard Baxter et al.'s "Content Analysis of Music Video" (1985), and Pat Aufderheide's "Music Videos: The look of the Sound" (1986) express concerns with gender representation that are relevant to my research.

Baxter et al.'s article tracked visual trends in music video in a similar way as the articles mentioned above. Ultimately, they were concerned with characterizing the focus of the medium at large, though two of their research questions denote a foundation for gender subversion research in music video: "Do music videos focus on bizarre, unconventional representations? Is androgyny present in portrayals of video characters?"<sup>67</sup> Baxter et al.'s research takes a sterile approach to dealing with the questions, which effectively remain unanswered: 23 content categories were created to analyze a sample of 62 videos. Of the content categories studied, they reported frequent occurrences of visual abstraction, sex, dance, violence and crime.<sup>68</sup> The authors quantify reoccurring types of images, but do so without discussing examples of said images, or in what videos they occur. Furthermore, it is never questioned, or argued whether these images are positive, negative, or progressive. And, unlike the attention drawn to the bizarre and unconventional, no concerns are posed about social limitations potentially presented by stereotyping subjects, or homogenous social representation.

We might consider it easy to answer affirmatively to the article's questions, considering the work of artists such as David Bowie and Madonna, who consistently play with established representations of gender. Yet, tangled in such a seemingly simplistic response, are weighted issues of normativity around which this dissertation is based. What is meant by "bizarre" and "unconventional"? Are these qualities to be specifically attributed within the context of gender, as might be suggested by the second question's more specific inquiry about androgyny? If so, have our definitions of those subjective terms, or what we might qualify as representing them changed since 1985? Does answering "yes" affirm a space for the bizarre

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<sup>67</sup> Richard Baxter et Al., "A Content Analysis of Music Video," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Volume 29, Issue 3. (1985): 333-340.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

and unconventional within the popular, or is it an act of separatism, which reminds us that those artists and their identities are definitively “outside” and “other”?

Baxter et al.’s text is crucial to the history of music video for having introduced questions of non-normative gender representation into the study of the medium. Given the development of that research since the article was written, however, the value of this content analysis is drawn less from the actual data, and more from a consideration of the still-relevant questions posed by the authors’ ambiguous attitudes toward those representations, reflected in the language of the study.

In the year following Baxter et al.’s article, Pat Aufderheide’s “Music Videos: The look of the Sound” (1986) advanced the dialogue about gender, and the fluid nature of identity in music video through a concentrated focus on how gender and identity are represented. The article also asserts the medium’s value as a filmic genre, and explores its modes of production and consumption. Aufderheide opens her discourse about gender through the concept of identity. She identifies music video as a site where identities must be represented by a strong aesthetic image, and considers the value of performers’ ability to rapidly reinvent their identities through music video. Aufderheide parlays this into discussion of cultural stereotypes—male and female identities drawn from pop culture. She claims that, “In music videos, the very act of image manipulation is the action. The sex role, more than a costume, is an identity fashioned from the outside in.”<sup>69</sup> Aufderheide essentially introduces the concept of gender performance, though rather than her focus resting on how gender roles can be manipulated through performance, she simply highlights music video as a site where the notion of fixed identity is combatted. Aufderheide’s point falls short by failing to note the manipulation available in a performance context. If identity is fluid, though the set of social expectations attached to those identities is not, then the value of that fluidity is compromised. It is through acts or performances of subversion that I will argue that the social roles attached to identities can be destabilised and reestablished.

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<sup>69</sup> Pat Aufderheide, “Music Videos: The look of the Sound,” *Journal of Communication*, Volume 36, Issue 1. (1986): 60.

Similar to my concerns with subversion, however, Aufderheide works around several terms, which might be considered resistant to social conformity. For both men and women (apparently regardless of sexuality, for she makes no note of it), she identifies grotesquerie and shifting identities as resulting in androgyny. It is difficult to determine whether she qualifies this as a positive or negative strategy, especially given the traditionally negative meaning of grotesque as hideous and repellent. Her intrigue with experimental gender representation seems to outweigh any concerns with preserving traditional gender norms, however. This is supported by her elaboration on androgyny in the following passage:

“Androgyny may be the most daring statement that an entire range of sex roles is fair game for projecting one’s own statement of the moment. Gender is no longer fixed; male and female fractured into a kaleidoscope of images.”<sup>70</sup>

The sense of bravery and commitment aligned with the idea of a “daring statement” suggests that Aufderheide is supportive of a destabilisation of restrictive gender roles. Her use of the term “fair game” would also suggest that previously the game was not fair— an acknowledgement of the inequities of the male/female binary. Lastly, the comparison of new gender roles to the highly aestheticised image of a kaleidoscope also has a positive connotation. So much of her analysis, however, is focused on the fluid nature of gender representation, rather than any ability for the characteristics traditionally attached to men and women to be appropriated by the opposite sex. Much of my discussion of subversion will examine performances where the action subverts the image (feminine action paired with masculine appearance, for example) to show that neither action, nor image is truly fixed to a particular sex.

Perhaps Aufderheide’s valorisation of grotesquerie and androgyny represent her own strategies for lending ideas of gender representations more cinematic qualities that support her attempts to legitimise the medium. As a filmic genre, Aufderheide asserts:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 64.

“Music videos are more than a fad, more than fodder for spare hours and dollars of young consumers. They are pioneers in video expression and the results of their reshaping of the form extend far beyond the TV set.”<sup>71</sup>

With the label "pioneers in video expression," and by referencing influence “beyond the TV set,” Aufderheide suggests that music video will have an influence in the wider canon of cinema or moving image. Though I question how she lends to this thesis through the terminology used to discuss gender representation, I agree with how she sanctions music video as an influential art form. This establishes a basis for analyzing symbol, scene, character, costume, or movement as we might in a cinematic, or art historical context. It also privileges the artistic modes of the genre—its elements of high art—over its role as a capitalist emblem and marketing tool.

The duality of music video as culturally high and low however, is built into Aufderheide’s view of music video as postmodern. Aufderheide calls music video, “perhaps the most accessible form of that larger tendency known as postmodern art.”<sup>72</sup> The discussion of music video as postmodern, or in fact whether it should be qualified as such, is a main focus of music video literature following Aufderheide’s article. It is a factor that separates my dissertation from other discourse on music video; much of which draws meaning from the work through its postmodern aesthetics. It is explored in the frequently cited, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (1987) by E. Ann Kaplan, in Simon Frith et al.’s text, *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* (1993), which argues against qualifying music video as postmodern, and in Robin Roberts’ *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* (1996), which, conversely, claims the postmodern qualities of music video as the very source of the genre's feminism.

Before addressing these texts, I would like to conclude my review of Aufderheide’s analysis by noting that from her work we are also able to begin piecing together a history of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 58.

production and consumption of music video, and consider how shifts in those modes might also change music video content. She explores how music video consumption affects the formation of identity through a relationship to music as subculture, especially by MTV's largest audience: adolescent consumers. The myriad social settings where music videos are consumed, or even used in a somewhat decorative manor (on view at clubs or retail establishments) equates to omnipresence with subversive commercial implications. She explains that, "music videos have animated and set to music a tension basic to American youth culture: that feeling of instability which fuels the search to buy and belong."<sup>73</sup> Here, Aufderheide allocates music videos, not as sites of advertisements for specific objects, but as advertisements for insecurity. If the fantastically cool identities portrayed in music video can deflect insecurity onto their viewers, then consumption—likely in those social and commercial spaces where they are on view—may be triggered in order to achieve such a desired identity. Her portrait of early modes of distribution and consumption is of note for its stark contrast to the post-internet shifts in those modes that have allowed audiences to self-curate videos from websites such as YouTube and Vimeo, rather than relying on TV stations such as MTV to dictate programming. Though the websites I have mentioned are not without advertisements, nor do they combat whatever insecurities are inherently linked to consumerism, these sites offer the user/viewer/listener increased control and freedom to decide what media they consume, rather than a corporation suggesting to them what music, video, or identity is worthy of their attention.

It is of note that despite Aufderheide's, and to a lesser extent Baxter et al.'s interest in gender, sexuality is never discussed. These authors also fail to delve into the work; they discuss a limited number of specific images and representations. These articles illuminate attitudes toward gender at the time, and foreshadow the expansion of formal and theoretical discourses on the medium. They also reflect on modes of consumption, which will be crucial to identifying the shifts in those patterns over the last thirty years.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 63.

The subsequent wave of music video literature in the 1990s addresses the growing interest in more nuanced debates of representation, and expands the exploration of the medium's production, distribution, and form. Frith et al.'s text, *Sound and Vision* (1993) builds on the existing literature on gender in music video with chapters on the emergence of female address, and an exploration of masculine and feminine gender representation in heavy metal music. Frith et al. also explore several evolving modes of production and consumption, whose implications may also be seen as contributing to the evolution of the practice portion of my dissertation.

Lisa Lewis' chapter, "Being Discovered: The Emergence of Female Address on MTV" breaks ground by investigating the presentation of female sexuality in music video. This topic is explored through much of my dissertation, largely from a third-wave feminist perspective, identifying videos whose representations of sexuality act as confrontational to a patriarchal tradition that would seek to own, conceal, or chastise such expressions. To situate Lewis' perspective, I draw from Robin Roberts' text, *Ladies First: Women in Music Video* (1996), which will be explored in a later section. Roberts notes:

"The conflict between feminists who envision an open expression and acceptance of all types of sexuality and those who oppose pornographic depictions of women has a central place in this discussion of music videos."<sup>74</sup>

Lewis falls somewhere in between the two positions that Roberts establishes. Considering the balance between expression, and the reality of marketing, Lewis explains:

"Women's subordinate position as female subjects whose mode of promotion is highly tied to sexist standards of representation further complicates the already

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<sup>74</sup> Robin Roberts, *Ladies First: Women in Music Video* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Publishers, 1996), 25.

difficult negotiation of musicians' contradictory roles as artists and workers in an industrial mode of production."<sup>75</sup>

This quote exposes the emerging entanglements of sexuality in modes of production and promotion in music video. She implicates that that difficulty of being a female "artist," or creatively expressive in a trade that relies on industrial modes of production is further complicated by the promotion of that work relying on the commodification of female bodies in a heterosexist industry.

Despite this tension, however, she also recognises music video as a site for the cultivation of female identity. Before music video was introduced, performers' identities were largely communicated through their live performances. Lewis observes the ability of music video to access a wider array of images with which to communicate an identity in the following passage:

"Role-playing, limited to costuming changes and the use of props on stage, can be intricately elaborated in music video through location shooting, the use of sets, and interactions with actors. In other words the gamut of devices available to television productions is opened up to musicians in music video."<sup>76</sup>

Though Lewis questions the "sexist standards of representation" which may be produced in music video, the passage above considers how production methods might be able to combat existing representations of women by elaborating on the lexicon of images presently considered feminine. This can be seen in videos for songs such as M.I.A.'s *Bad Girls* (2010) [Figure 1], where women proudly operate muscle cars and weapons as accessories of wealth and power.

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<sup>75</sup> Lisa Lewis, "Being Discovered: The Emergence of Female Address on MTV," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 131.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.



Figure 1: M.I.A., *Bad Girls*, 2012

Sexualised representations can be cultivated in a similar way—when presented creatively, and expressive of independence; such as in the video for Madonna’s *Express Yourself* (1989), where Madonna is positioned as the overseer of a factory of working men. She costumes herself in a suit to express her masculinity, but aggressively opens her jacket to the camera to expose lace lingerie, indicative of her femininity, and sexuality [Figure 2].



Figure 2: Madonna, *Express Yourself*, 1989



In addition to considering modes of video production in relation to female representation, Lewis also highlights how the distribution of music video acted as a new mode of popularizing female artists, and cultivated female identity through the fandom resulting from video consumption. The distribution of music video into homes created a domestic outlet to promote musicians. Because the concert tour had been a primary means for promoting rock musicians before MTV, and was identified as male adolescent cultural activity, video afforded female musicians an address to girls and women.<sup>77</sup> Lewis notes that, as a result, female audience attendance increased at rock concerts, specifically at those of female artists. She points to Pat Benatar as an example. Lewis continues to draw parallels between the domestic spaces women stereotypically occupy, the invasion of that space by music video, and the cultivation of “girl culture” – a space created through female music fandom. She identifies the craze of trying to emulate the look of Madonna by female fans as an example of this. The points Lewis explores are valuable to this research for how they culminate in strategies for subversion which have continued to be used in the medium: confronting sex norms through the representation of female sexuality, cultivating identity through an exploration and expansion of video imagery, or entering domestic sites where representations of sexualised female rock stars might be effectively revelatory for women who associate their femininity with the false confines of that domestic and familial space.

The dominating hetero-world view maintained by Lewis is somewhat balanced by another of the book’s chapters, which is relevant to my research: Robert Walser’s, “Forging Masculinity: Heavy–Metal Sounds and Images of Gender.” This chapter dissects the roles and rituals of masculine identity tied to the musical subculture of Heavy Metal. Walser dispels the idea of identity as stable or natural, and believes that metal fans “accomplish gender” through the genre’s focus on violence, madness, mythology, and horror.<sup>78</sup> Though he does not use the term “performance,” he both suggests that the masculine role is one that fans learn to play through the script of metal, and later maintains that the insecurity of identity means that the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Walser, "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 154.

accomplished gender must be constantly “re-achieved,” not unlike rehearsal, and repeated performance.

Walser unpacks queer and feminist issues through his exploration of queer, metal subculture, androgyny, and female participation. He reminds us that images of masculine display can be construed in a variety of ways—implicating the audience’s role in qualifying the performance. As example, he points to Chicago’s Gay Metal Society, which celebrates the homoeroticism latent in metal’s intense displays of masculine bonding.<sup>79</sup> He also claims that androgynous metal bands and fans appropriate icons of femininity in order to claim its “spectacularity” for themselves.<sup>80</sup> Walser identifies metal androgyny as a fusion of male power and female erotic surface,<sup>81</sup> which notably disrupts the inner/outer distinctions of the gender binary. Though Walser qualifies the power available through metal fandom as classically “male”—represented by physical power, dominance, rebellion, and flirting with the dark side of life—he maintains that access to this power is still available to women, because it is channeled through a medium—music—which is difficult to police.<sup>82</sup> And, much like how Lewis identifies “girl culture” as a product of the consumption of music video, Walser sees metal as providing similarly niche female space, where women connect through fandom.

Understanding the systems explored by Lewis and Walser is the first step to understanding how, and why those structures may be subverted, and identifying when those attacks are made. Oddly, despite their inclusion in a “music video reader,” the articles focus more substantially on musical culture, and representation within specific subcultures. This reflects one of the main tenets of the book, reiterated throughout by its various contributors. Frith et al. maintain that music video should not be studied independently from the music for which it was made. My dissertation sits in opposition to this, not only through its dominant exploration of visual imagery, but through my practice. The videos used as projections during live shows, create music videos in real time: music, performance, and image collide.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 174.

They are meant to augment or complicate themes of my songs. Because they are not anchored to specific songs, however, they may be re-organised to produce different meanings based on which tracks they are paired with during a live performance. The video for *Window Licker* (1999) by Aphex Twin, or *Set It Off* (2012) by Diplo also defy the notion of a video's visual relying on its soundtrack to produce meaning: they feature no sections of vocal, or instrumental performance by the artists, and do not visually reference themes explored in the lyrics.

Contradictory to the very thesis of *Sound and Vision*, I see no necessary relationship between the images chosen for a video, and the track for which it was made; and hence no necessity for *always* discussing both in my research (there are admittedly times when discussing the track contributes to interpreting the image). The changing modes of production and consumption of the medium have contributed to this in two ways. Firstly, as music video popularity increased and became more closely tied to an artist's success, the production standards increased. Frith et al. use the example of Michael Jackson's song, *Thriller* (1982), saying, "the accompanying video went beyond the then-established conventions and limitations of the medium."<sup>83</sup> I argue that because videos' production levels were pushing them ever further into the realm of the cinematic, that they have become more sophisticated art objects to examine in and of themselves. Another of the authors' points, however, is that often a song's predictable pop structure and commercial accessibility counteracts the seemingly sophisticated and artistic nature of the video. At present, however, music videos are the norm for—even expected of—artists of every musical genre; from the most experimental and proficient, to the mainstay chart-toppers that hammer out the same verse, chorus, verse patterns. The discrepant relationship between musical or cinematic quality pointed out by Frith et al. no longer seems a relevant factor to discussing the merits, or effects of a video. This same argument, part and parcel of his commitment to researching the look and sound of music video, contributes to Frith et al.'s attempts to discredit music video

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<sup>83</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 81.

as a postmodern<sup>84</sup> artifact: it cannot be considered a progressive form if the music is not of equal ingenuity as the video. This is a crucial departure from previous literature mentioned above in relation to Aufderheide's article, which I will now examine more closely.

Frith et al.'s denial of music video as postmodern is combatted in Roberts' *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* (1996), which identifies the postmodern handling of the form as a main source of its feminist message. Among other questions, she asks, "How can the deconstructive possibilities of the postmodern art form be harnessed for the subversive agenda of a feminism committed to questioning the traditional limits of femininity."<sup>85</sup> In response, she explores the denaturalisation of the female body through montage, rapid sequencing, and fragmentation as combatting beauty and passivity as naturally feminine. She also identifies a confrontation with the commercial commodification of women's bodies in videos for songs such as Pat Benatar's *Sex as a Weapon* (1985), where Benatar performs against a satirical background of dozens TV screens flashing commercial stereotypes of muscular men, and leggy models. Though my research is concerned with performance as the means of subverting traditional agendas, I agree with her focus on the form as its own source of discourse, and reference many of the same feminist texts, such as Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Roberts says that, "like Judith Butler, [her] approach to popular culture texts such as music videos builds on the understanding of the construction of femininity."<sup>86</sup> As will be similarly explored in my research, Roberts identifies various subversive strategies for exposing that construction. She discusses humor in Julie Brown's video for *The Homecoming*

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<sup>84</sup> Frith et al. outline the following facets of music video as having been misconstrued as representative of postmodernism: its fusion of high art and popular cultural discourses, the abandonment of grand narrative structures in favor of continuous, seamless, transmission, which imply an unstable text and self, the appropriation of aesthetics producing "intertextuality" typical of postmodern culture, which is then used to blur historical/chronological distinctions, so that conventional notions of past, present, and future are lost in the mix of images to produce the effect of seeming contemporary, and lastly, the 'schizophrenic' abandonment of rational, liberal-humanist discourse, which creates a nihilistic, amoral universe of representation, abandoning the realm of political and social engagement as they are generally recognised, leading either to a pessimistic diagnosis, or to the suggestion that postmodern culture constitutes new forms of political resistance (Frith et al., *Sound and Vision*, p. 46)

<sup>85</sup> Roberts, *Ladies First*, xxv.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

*Queen's Got a Gun* (1985), and the performative sexuality in Madonna's *Justify My Love* (1990) video. In her discussion of *Justify My Love*, Roberts explores the video's representation of homosexuality, mutability of gender, and lauds Madonna's expression of sexual control.

Roberts produces a thorough feminist discourse on music video, though in addition to only documenting work until 1996, it makes only passing mention of queer representation in its discussion of one video. My work will seek to explore an updated canon of feminist and queer work, and will rely more heavily on performance theory to discuss strategies of subversion, rather than Roberts' exploration made through the lens of Postmodernism.

The first decade of the new millennium has seen more focused studies of music videos, with a trend of essays investigating the intersection of race and gender in rap and hip-hop videos. This is explored in Rana Emerson's, "Where My Girls At?: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos" (2002), Kate Conrad et al.'s "Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A content Analysis of Rap Music Videos" (2009), and Murali Balaji's, "Vixen Resistin': Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip Hop Videos (2010), among others. Though the sexism and misogyny explored in some of these texts provide foils for appreciating the necessity of combative feminist and queer representations, the articles' focus on works that typify mis-representation of women, rather than confrontational feminist or queer videos, and are thus less relevant research materials for my project. Mako Fitts', "Drop It Like It's Hot: Culture Industry Laborers and their Perspectives on Rap Music Video Production" (2008) is also of note for its look at gender roles within music video's production industry, and the creative processes involved in the production of rap videos and artist marketing. Disappointingly, Fitts found similar structures of sexism behind the scenes of rap videos as were being reflected in the content of the work. Fitts maintains:

"...gendered hierarchies on video sets create divisions among women working in various positions, and discourage women from supporting one another, which, from a

black feminist perspective, does not accommodate an ethic of care and personal responsibility."<sup>87</sup>

The support amongst women, which Fitts found problematically absent in her study is key to how Emerson identifies feminist work. Though Emerson's text has been of particular relevance to the final chapter, it has also offered insightful dualisms in dealing with sexualised representations of the female body throughout.

Emerson's text seeks a balance between studying only problematic work laden with stereotypes of black womanhood, and a tendency to exaggerate the agency of black female performers, which she accuses Roberts of doing in *Ladies First*. From her pool of 56 videos, collected by taping video programming on MTV, BET, and VH1, Emerson asserts that, "the videos reflect how race, class, and gender continue to constrain, and limit the autonomy and agency of Black women."<sup>88</sup> She locates these limits in the presentation of predominantly idealised bodies, which she ties to a one-dimensional presentation of their womanhood, ie: focusing on their physicality and attractiveness exclusively, rather than representing 'the full range of their being.'<sup>89</sup> She also critiques some female performers' reliance on a sort of "male sponsor"— the inclusion of a male artist who might introduce, or vet the female performer. This study reminds us, not only of the limits of representation at the time, but of the outlets implicit in those limitations. Was there no interest in creating work which would subvert gender norms, or were these artists working within the confines of what they expected to be curated by music video networks? Emerson also notes the lack of sexual diversity in her sample:

"Sexual diversity is another element of Black Womanhood that is conspicuously absent and also reflects the desirability of perceived sexual availability for men. None

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<sup>87</sup> Mako Fitts, "Drop It Like It's Hot: Culture Industry Laborers and Their Perspectives on Rap Music Video Production," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Volume 8, Issue 1. (2007): 211

<sup>88</sup> Rana A. Emerson, "Where My Girls At?: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Video," *Gender and Society*, Volume 16, Issue 1. (2002): 120.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

of the videos featured performers who were lesbians or bisexual, nor did they show even implicit homosexual or bisexual themes."<sup>90</sup>

We will explore examples of black queer representation that include work by trans female, and gay cisgender male performers, however—consistent with Emerson's findings above—video work which features representations of black lesbianism and bi-sexuality remains limited. I would like it to be clear that neither Emerson's essay, nor this text look exclusively to the performers who identify as queer to self-express in a way that ticks boxes of representative categories. For example, is it unexpected that cisgender female rappers, Angel Haze, and Azealia Banks, who both publicly identify as bi-sexual do not reference their sexuality in their videos? Or, is this symptomatic of the broader musical landscape in which such representations are generally uncommon, or unacceptable, except in contexts of fictional fetish or fantasy? Are artists such as Banks and Haze accountable for populating the visual landscape with imagery that is an authentic representation of an experience they live? Or, are all artists accountable for destabilizing a heterosexist standard of desire? In the final chapter, we will also explore the positive relationship Emerson draws between black female agency, and signifiers of blackness, and the necessity of "sisterhood," and collaboration for accomplishing goals. Lastly, Emerson's text stands out for its balanced considerations of the precarity of bodily and sexual representations. As her title suggests, she maintains that black women must "negotiate" the boundaries between liberating self-expression, and capitulating to a hetero-male gaze when they display their bodies in a sexualised way. This is a tension that shall be explored throughout this text, though will not be limited to considering black, heterosexual, female subjects.

Three books on music video have also been published fairly recently, which are of note. Carol Vernallis released *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* in 2004, followed by *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* in 2013. Despite her extensive scholarship on the medium, Vernallis' texts are largely expressive of her background in communications studies, and cater to a focus much different than my own.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 123.

In her first book, she expresses concern with establishing music video as its own genre. Her mode of distinguishing the medium from film, photography, and television, however, reads almost like a “how-to” production guide, noting the genre’s various deployments of narrative, editing, actors, props, costumes, settings, and how a video is integrated with a song. Though the book advertises concerns with sexuality and representation; ultimately Vernallis explores only three videos made between 1986 and 1991, which is a disappointing selection for a medium that evolves so rapidly.

Her second book is further reflective of communication and film scholarship. She looks not only at music video, but YouTube clips, and “post-classical” film techniques related to our more rapid consumption of images, and more intense fusion of audio with visual. The text is of greater significance to this thesis for its exploration of how the post-internet viewing experience affects the music video medium—an issue not yet relevant at the time of publishing of her first book. For example, she explains how the aesthetics of homemade videos posted by YouTube users—that is, the non-famous, non-performing public who might post anything from a comic pet video to makeup tutorials—have been adopted by mainstream pop stars. This is seen in Lana Del Rey’s video for *Videogames* (2011), and Beyoncé’s *7/11* (2014) video [Figure 3]; which both feature lo-fi home recordings.



Figure 3: Beyoncé, *7/11*, 2014



Though, again, Vernallis' focus is on the form, my interest in this shift may play out as an analysis of how the mechanics of fandom have reversed, i.e.: stars utilizing low or common technologies such as the homemade video, and adopting more casual, less glamorous appearances, subverting the typical images of a "superstar." Though some issues of representation can be gleaned from Vernallis' scholarship, its relevance to this discourse is in its exploration of post-internet implications on the medium.

The last text to discuss in this review of existing music video scholarship is Diane Railton and Paul Watson's book, *Music Video: The Politics of Representation* (2011). This book would seem to share the concerns most closely aligned with my dissertation, though they take a starkly different approach to their research. Railton and Watson express their research concerns through a quote from Richard Dyer's book, *Matter of Images* (1993): "cultural representations have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated, but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society."<sup>91</sup> My focus on subversive representations of gender relates directly to a confrontation of those social limits referenced by Dyer. The authors also outline in their introduction that their approach is, "a feminist one, broadly speaking, inasmuch as its principal concern is with the production and reproduction of normative gendered identities."<sup>92</sup> Though I also take a feminist approach, I do so by identifying constructed challenges to normative gender roles. The fact that Railton and Watson are looking at normative constructions rather than subversive challenges to normativity is what separates our work.

I also find their pool of study disappointingly limited. The authors' engagement with feminist theory circulates exclusively around Pink's *Stupid Girls* (2006) video. Rather than exploring a canon of works whose feminist messages are as potent and nuanced as the styles and forms used to execute them, they use one, clever, though formally dismal example as an object

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

<sup>92</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 10.

around which various schools of feminism are explored. In the video, Pink plays dozens of female archetypes, which illustrate negative stereotypes of femininity: vanity, insecurity, materialism. Railton and Watson cite Pink's rampant changing of roles as conveying the tenets of postmodern and poststructuralist theories, that the self is not an essential self, rooted in genetic make-up, or formed in early psychological development, but rather, a discursively constructed self, produced and maintained through the workings of a multiplicity of cultural institutions and practices.<sup>93</sup> Again, we share an interest in the constructed self. The key discrepancy is that they explore a video that exposes the construction of our limits and stereotypes, rather than the threats thereto.

Railton and Watson also point to the tension created in the video amongst liberation, consumption, and mass-mediated images of feminism and femininity as reflective of existing tensions between the schools of feminism and post-feminism—the idea that the battle fought by second wave feminists has effectively been won. They compare skeptics of post-feminism, Yvonne Tasker, and Susan Faludi to its staunch representatives such as Christina Hoff Sommers, Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe. They note Angela McRobbie's concerns that an appropriation of post-feminism in the media can give the false impression that equality has been achieved. They also look at the conflation of post-feminism with the image of the “successful,” i.e.: rich and fashionable, woman, and question how this excludes social factions for whom this lifestyle is yet unachievable. This, in turn, is juxtaposed by the work of Imogen Tyler, who calls for “narcissism as liberation.” Railton and Watson proceed to vacillate between the information they have introduced, and how it can be applied for a post-feminist reading of Pink's video. They use the video to arrive at the elaboration of these schools of feminist thought, but fail to discuss any further videos that may serve to exemplify these ideas. Though much can be taken away from their overview of these theorists, their study of music video seems an arbitrary vehicle for exploring existing theory, rather than a source for culling unexplored feminist representations, which may expand feminist discourse.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 20.

Though feminist issues are most prevalent in the first chapter, Railton and Watson reconnect to issues of gender at various points throughout the text, which are worth noting. The authors take an odd step back in their second chapter, re-focusing on sub-categories of music video. The classification system seeks to document trends within the medium: pseudo-documentary, art, narrative, staged performance. In the following passage, Railton and Watson connect each of these categories to their respective mode of representation:

“Pseudo-documentary videos tend to privilege the skills of the working musician, the art video confers artistic credibility on the performer, the narrative video situates the performer within the iconographic landscape of the musical genre, and the staged performance video reinforces the mediated image of the artist(s) it promotes. And, even if, generically speaking, hybrid videos are more complex, in the end they too work to situate performers within appropriate discourses of authenticity.”<sup>94</sup>

By identifying these sub-genres, Railton and Watson arrive at the idea of authenticity. They use the two versions of the video for Khia’s song, “My Neck, My Back” (2002) to show how video has the capacity to establish, or deny a performer’s authorship, and thus their authenticity. Speaking of the original version of the video, Railton and Watson says it is:

“a clearly authored video where Khia is represented as an authentic voice of a music genre and the community associated with it, as someone who has something to say about both the pleasures and politics of heterosexual relationships.”<sup>95</sup>

Railton and Watson draw this conclusion from Khia’s presence and prominence in the original video as host and performer at a house party, where she sings about her confrontationally explicit sexual expectations from her partner: “Lick it good, suck this pussy just like you should.”<sup>96</sup> In stark comparison, the UK version of the video featured bikini-clad women washing a bright yellow H2 Hummer—a hyper-masculine military vehicle—

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>96</sup> Khia, "My Neck, My Back," *Thug Misses*, Artemis Records, Musical Recording, 2002.

ultimately hosed down by firemen in what I must irrevocably qualify as a juvenile presentation of an absurdist cumshot. In the following passage, Railton and Watson outline, and analyse how the effect of the original video has been reversed through the sexist imagery of the second version:

“Any notion of active female sexuality is belied as the women themselves are shown to be the ones responding to the command to ‘lick it’, giving pleasure rather than receiving it...we are constantly given access to isolated and objectified parts of these women’s bodies. Indeed, for much of the video we are presented with a concatenation of disconnected body parts where the buttocks of one woman are replaced by the lips of another, and images of hands wielding wet sponges are followed by close-ups of thighs in an unidentifiable confusion of female flesh. All markers of the women’s individual personality are effectively removed, literally washed away, so that all that is left are differently clothed but similar bodies.”<sup>97</sup>

Railton and Watson’s critique is clear and potent, and parallels several points made in my work regarding the discrepancy between sexual objectification and sexual agency. In this instance, Railton and Watson give equal attention to the progressive version of the video with an empowered female lead, and that illustrates the prevalence of sexist representations of objectified women. It bears repeating that despite the overlap of our concerns in this example, however, Railton and Watson typically privilege a dismantling of existing sexist norms over considerations of subversive gender representations. Furthermore, though gender representation figures into this argument, what is being explored is not necessarily sexism or feminism, but the power of music video to represent opposing identities with equal facility, highlighting it as a tenuous site of cultural production. This instance also further reinforces the independent relationship between song and video.

Railton and Watson shift focus to issues of racial representation in their subsequent chapters, “Race and Femininity” and “Performing Ethnicity.” They use Christina Aguilera's video,

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<sup>97</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 80-81.

*Can't Hold Us Down* (2003) to explore the ways in which racial identity is represented lyrically and visually. The authors argue that Aguilera co-opts a non-white aesthetic, and includes a performance from black, female rapper, Lil Kim to sanction the performance—what bell hooks refers to as 'eating the other.'<sup>98</sup> Railton and Watson compare the contrasting experience of the two artists' sexual expression by saying:

"Kim's possibilities for self-determination are circumscribed by discourses of blackness (whether, that is, to simply adopt them, to embrace them, or to challenge them). The discursive resources available to Aguilera, by contrast, are various and fluid in the possibilities they offer for self-inscription."<sup>99</sup>

In this passage, Railton and Watson are referencing the stereotype of black female sexuality as wild and primal, that she asserts Kim (and not Aguilera) must navigate. The writers proceed to address the historical discourse of said stereotype. Unlike the various other accounts of this history which I have encountered, Railton and Watson pair their account with an overview of white female sexuality as well, which draws on more restrictive ideas of 'the pure,' as promoted in biblical figures and Victorian conventions. Railton and Watson then proceed to explore additional videos that reflect these prescriptive identities. As they do with gendered representations, the raced and gendered representations which Railton and Watson unpack are not progressive threats to stasis, but rather problematic reflections of historical attitudes.

The last chapter, "Masculinity and the Male Body," proposes interesting ideas about the representation of masculinity in music video on a global level. The authors assert that the various ways in which male identity is inscribed in popular culture, and how these representations act as a resource for the lived enactment of "being masculine," actually destabilise the unity, coherence and security of masculinity.<sup>100</sup> This is not to say, however,

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<sup>98</sup> bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 32.

<sup>99</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 90.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

that this destabilises the patriarchy at large. Railton and Watson elaborate on this in the following passage:

“while it is important that there are a range of masculine subject positions made available through popular culture, what remains all important is that, with very few exceptions, they are constructed and operate within the rigid constraints of heteronormative discourse. In this context, even performances of masculinity which at first sight seem to be questioning the unity and fixity of masculine subjectivity very often end up not only leaving the power dynamics between men and women untouched, but worse, also extend the range of ways of being a man who ‘acceptably’ oppresses women.”<sup>101</sup>

This is one of the few instances where Railton and Watson observe the performative aspect of gender. They illustrate this idea by comparing different representations of masculinity in the work of Kanye West, James Blunt, and 50 Cent; but ultimately conclude that none of these representations of masculinity compromise their standing as (dominant) Men. Though I agree with these assertions, my research has identified not ‘few,’ but in fact, many exceptions—in both popular culture, and more subcultural musical enclaves—to the exclusively heteronormative videos observed by Railton and Watson. The authors cover feminism and female racial politics, problematise representations of masculinity that consistently reassert a patriarchal dominance, and yet issues of queer representation remain unexplored.

This lack of queer analysis might be accounted for by the fact that the book was published in 2011, before the now landmark video work of Lady Gaga largely reignited issues of gender, and queer representation. Railton and Watson acknowledge the ill-timed publishing in an afterword exclusively dedicated to Lady Gaga. In addition to exploring gender issues, they use the artist as a vehicle for discussing new modes of video access through YouTube and iTunes, and the intersectionality with online fandom, as seen through the creation of GIFs.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 125.

They also credit Lady Gaga with renewing interest in video at large, mainly due to her sensational aesthetics. In the following passage, Railton and Watson finally examine the combative potential of femininity in Lady Gaga's video, *Telephone* (2010):

“[*Telephone*] offers a deliberately ambiguous and playfully perverse image of femininity that defies normative conceptions of female sexuality. In its absurdist bricolage of lesbian prison films, female revenge fantasy, feminist road movie, and TV cooking shows it activates a number of complex sex-gender discourses and reworks and repositions them in an indeterminate aesthetic space somewhere between high art and trash culture.”<sup>102</sup>

Here, Railton and Watson engage with the work by defining and praising the feminist current of the video through an exploration of its cinematic devices and references. Furthermore, they relate the polarizing effects of Lady Gaga's feminist sexual agency and queer representation to Madonna's early video canon. They predict (accurately, as time has now shown) that Lady Gaga will turn into a similar subject for academics, who have dealt with Madonna's work in texts such as *The Madonna Connection* (1993), *Madonnarama* (1993), and *Deconstructing Madonna* (1993). Railton and Watson's assessment, and these examples of existing literature on another, not only highly similar artist, but the one Lady Gaga has, without question modeled herself after most directly, highlights the broad failure of video critics to explore queer representation unless employed by artists in the very top tier of success. Though my dissertation will certainly cover these artists, the point here is that the scope must be broadened to explore queer representation in lesser known artists' work.

Though Railton and Watson eschew issues of queer representation, maintaining that there are but 'few' artists who work outside a heteronormative framework, and academics have largely focused on Madonna's and Lady Gaga's queer iconography, several books have recently focused on queerness in music, amongst its performers, and occasionally in their videos, if not focusing exclusively on queer music videos: Jodie Taylor's *Playing it Queer: Popular*

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 146.

*Music, Identity, and Queer World Making* (2012), and Doris Leibetseder's *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music* (2012).

As it pertains to my research, these texts have served to explore how other scholars observe links between music and queer theory, culture, and identity. Because these authors and I reference many of the same queer and feminist texts, and deal with queer and feminist artists in similar ways, it is key to note before proceeding that my research makes a more intense focus on video, looking at the scenes in which artists insert themselves, the symbols they use to populate those scenes, and the characters with which they choose to align themselves. For example, for Taylor's research on identity, Lady Gaga is a sufficient queer feminist subject in and of herself. What is of greater interest to me, however, are, for example, Lady Gaga's collaborations with queer video director and photographer, Steven Klein, which, have produced vastly more numerous and complex images of homoeroticism and BDSM aesthetics (token of Klein's other work) in her music videos.

Taylor says that her aim is “to conduct a detailed qualitative inquiry into queer musical performance, identities and scenes – to explore queer self-fashioning and world-making as it occurs in and through music.”<sup>103</sup> To establish this framework, Taylor gives a thorough introduction to queer theory in her first chapter, exploring the emergence of the term “Queer” through activist group, Queer Nation in the 1990s, and exploring its various meanings. She proceeds to give a background of the study of homosexuality, to trace the arrival of the term “Queer,” and contextualise its activist connotation. She identifies its researchers, from Magnus Hirschfeld and Sigmund Freud to Alfred Kinsey, and the gay activist groups that began emerging in the 1950s, such as One Inc., The Mattachine Society, and Daughters of Bilitis. She also unpacks the subsequent emergence of queer theory, concluding that it, “undermines the binary logic that constructs identities as oppositional and exclusionary, and seeks as its primary strategy the de-naturalisation of identity categories.”<sup>104</sup> She explores major tenets— normativity, heteronormativity, homonormativity and performativity—

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<sup>103</sup> Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 4.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.



through engagement with texts from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Her historical review ultimately serves to identify queer identities and their effects in music. She makes the following statement about Butler, which reflects my own interest in considering gender representation in music video from a Butlerian perspective:

“The power of Butler’s theory of gender performativity is its ability to reveal that we, as individuals, are not locked into gender roles; there is no natural way to desire, and there is no natural way to perform identity upon our bodies.”<sup>105</sup>

Taylor establishes a queer academic frame through which she and I both observe incarnations of identity in popular music. She applies this frame through her subsequent chapters on a vast proliferation of queer performance styles, and musical genres: camp, drag, queer punk, homocore, the "Womyn’s Music Movement" of the 1960s, glam rock, shock rock, and the Riot Grrrl movement, which began in the 1990s. Though many of these genres and subcultures are not explicitly dealt with in my research, her exploration nevertheless helps build the lexicon of terms and images to reference when analysing queer representation in music video. Related to Butler’s theory of performativity, she elaborates on music as a site for (queer) identity making in the following passage:

“Music is a way for us to translate, perform and intensify through our bodies, intimate thoughts, feelings and desires of the body. The act of creating and performing music – whether creating or performing it ourselves or listening to it, and thus performing musical meaning-making operations for ourselves (Frith, 1996) – results not only in the creation and performance of sounds but also in the creation and performance of subjectivities.”<sup>106</sup>

If, as Taylor asserts, music allows us to birth or transform our identities, music video allows for the proliferation of representation of said identity. I assert that in the context of music video, we must consider these subjectivities noted by Taylor as “performed,” in a

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 44.

conventional sense, given the fabricated, planned and scripted nature of the elements of music videos: costumes, set, musical performance, lights, characters. In other words: given that it *is* a performance. I am further interested in how subversive performances in popular media effect gender norms and roles in real life—for the audience of those performances. This is a shared focus of Taylor’s, though in the following passage she expresses her skepticism of how to measure such effects:

“The potential for a performance to subvert or expose the rigidity and unnaturalness of gender and sexuality will be a fundamental measurement of its success at queering normativity. However, the multiple potential of meanings suggests that the measurement of its success will always remain ambiguous, thus the political and subversive potential of performance is always contextual.”<sup>107</sup>

Though there may be no way to measure the effects of subversive performances, she contradicts this in the following passage through her identification of artists whose direct combat of gender norms may be considered *particularly* subversive, and yet have the largest audiences:

“Spectacular musicalised manifestations of peculiar, strange, queer embodied obscenities like [Marilyn] Manson or [Lady] Gaga are considered especially dangerous, disturbing and subversive because they pre-empt, perform and circulate a range of new identificatory and disidentificatory possibilities that lie outside of the given codes of gender and sexual identity and pleasure—codes upon which society relies for the maintenance of order and power. And they do so spectacularly and on a grand scale in the most popular and populist forms of music culture: the pop charts.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 48.

Taylor acknowledges the powerful influence of subversive artists despite her earlier concern with exactly how to qualify or contextualise such influence. She also locates agency to subvert gender norms as being precisely in the performance. I suggest that one benefit of researching music video is being able to trace, over time, a replication of queer aesthetics by contemporary artists that may previously have been considered taboo (the shared aesthetics of Madonna and Lady Gaga being the most obvious example), or a proliferation of gendered identities represented. As mentioned by Vernallis and Railton and Watson, online fandom such as Gif-making and fan videos on Youtube also speak to a correlative effect between gender subversion in music and music video, and how those identities are adopted by fans. Indeed, Taylor's very text may contradict the notion of being unable to account for influence. She and I, as well as the authors of the various texts we have consulted, exemplify the influence of these artists' work, shown by our production of discourse.

Like Taylor, Doris Leibetseder also offers insightful observations of queerness across the landscape of popular music, though I struggle slightly with the architecture of her research. Leibetseder explains that her work, "describes traces, paths, or other ways in popular music that deviate from heterosexual orientation."<sup>109</sup> This culminates in her division of chapters according to the individual strategies of subversion that she identifies in popular music, looking as far back as the late 19th century. These categories focus on irony, parody, camp, mask/masquerade, mimesis/mimicry, and trans and cyborg imagery. For each chapter, the method is explored first, followed by an applicable example. Because all of these strategies/categories could be employed in contexts that are neither subversive, nor queer, however, the text occasionally lacks an integrative approach. Also, whereas there may be sections in my text where I consider artists such as Lady Gaga and Madonna in dialogue with one another, Leibetseder considers artists in dialogue with the subversive approach to which she has linked them: she links Madonna to Irony, and Lady Gaga, to her respective category—Parody. Some categories do include more than one artist, however, Leibetseder ultimately places the emphasis on illustrating the tenets of the strategy, rather than observing

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<sup>109</sup> Doris Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 14.

how the work might integrate a multiplicity of subversive devices. Though our attention to subversion aligns our research, Leibetseder also does not study works through performance theory, despite qualifying subversion through a sort of secondary index of theatrical and aesthetic devices. The overall scope of work also differs greatly, with Leibetseder's text focused on more musical aspects, over a longer period, and mine limited to music videos made since 1981, and a consideration of the historical contexts which shape their themes. Though several of the artists we observe overlap—Peaches, Bjork, Madonna—another pitfall of Leibetseder's text, which she also addresses, is a lack of work by artists of color in her research. Since the publishing of Leibetseder's text, several queer artists of color have come to prominence, such as Le1f, Mykki Blanco, Zebra Katz, and Cakes da Killa. Videos by Le1f and Mykki Blanco will be examined in the first chapter, though I will also explore classic feminist videos by TLC and Salt-N'-Pepa. Despite Leibetseder's exclusion of Salt-N'-Pepa's work for what she considers to be their heterosexual handling of sexuality, I interpret their work as employing a queer handling of a promiscuous sexuality outside classical feminine norms. In spite of this absence, and a minor critique of Leibetseder's organisational methods, her text covers a vast array of quality queer work in a range of medium: *Scream Club* videos, Annie Lennox album art, queer burlesque, JD Samson's lyrics for the musical project, *MEN*, and the feminist-lesbian label, Olivia Records, among others.

I have highlighted several texts above, which expose existing discourse, and help situate my research. I hope to have related how those chosen have been of particular relevance to this project, and will serve the cultivation of new discourse on music video. Since MTV's 1981 inception, music video and its modes of production and consumption have changed drastically. The literature on the medium has consistently fought to keep up with this evolution, having taken various approaches to understanding music video as an art form and communication device. With research that draws on postmodernism, film theory, and feminist theory, among other ideas and lenses, all have touched on issues of representation, which remain particularly precarious in the medium. Despite texts which have taken a broad focus of queerness in popular music, a gap in music video research lingers in the discussion of queer representation. This text considers a queer and feminist history, and contemporary

landscape of the medium that looks beyond the canons of singular artists such as Madonna and Lady Gaga. Though comparably more work has been done on feminist music videos, that research is due for a massive update in consideration of contemporary work of the last decade. I will apply performance theory to the medium as a means of locating the ability to subvert gender precisely in the ability to perform it. Though a lower budget, DIY aesthetic has become somewhat prevalent through post-internet modes of production and consumption, the videos which will take focus in my dissertation are those that are most widely consumed, and by no coincidence, are also highly produced, theatrical works. Avant-garde performance theory illuminates subversive mechanisms at play in the representation of gender, and highlights the performative and cinematic facets of medium so often categorised as disposably commercial. In addition to written research, I will also contribute a body of video work that takes practical considerations of these ideas, progressing the practice of gender subversion in music video.

## Chapter I

### Protection and Provocation During the AIDS Crisis

"It comes down to this.  
 Your kiss.  
 Your fist.  
 And your strain.  
 It gets under my skin.  
 Within."<sup>110</sup>

The first official reporting on AIDS was released June 5, 1981,<sup>111</sup> when The United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention published a morbidity report, which described the same rare lung infection in five young, healthy, gay men in Los Angeles.<sup>112</sup> MTV first aired two months later, on August 1, 1981. The work explored in this chapter marks the medium's first response to a major cultural crisis. These works navigate multiple facets of that crisis, though their queer and feminist strategies mark the "ruptural unity," which characterise significant cultural conjunctures, according to cultural theorist, Stuart Hall.

What these works sought to rupture was the silence and conservatism that the epidemic produced. To qualify these more acutely, let us first consider how Jonathan Engle, author of *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS* (2006) characterises President Reagan's response to the crisis:

"Reagan himself was not concerned with the issue and devoted almost none of his personal time to educating himself about it or to engaging in AIDS policy debates with his staff, members of Congress, or the public. He did not publicly say the word

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<sup>110</sup> Nine Inch Nails, "Sin," *Pretty Hate Machine*, TWT Records, Musical Recording, 1989.

<sup>111</sup> Researchers referred to the condition as "Gay-Related Immune Deficiency" after initial health reports were released in 1981. The use of the term, "AIDS" (Auto-Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was adopted in September, 1982.

<sup>112</sup> "A Timeline of HIV/AIDS," Aids.gov, <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>, (accessed April 7, 2017).

‘AIDS’ until 1987, and devoted only one speech in his entire presidency to the topic”<sup>113</sup>

Reagan’s failure to publicly acknowledge AIDS would ultimately be qualified as one of the most significant obstacles to controlling it. In 1987, the surgeon general, Dr. C. Everett Koop produced a report citing education as crucial to fighting the disease. The report emphasized comprehensive sex education in elementary and secondary schools, condom usage, home-based family discussions on sexuality, and monogamy.<sup>114</sup> The passage above indicates the silent handling of AIDS by the president, though conservative measures were also taken that contradicted Koop’s assessment that, “Ignorance regarding sexuality in general, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in particular, were the most substantial barriers to controlling the disease.”<sup>115</sup>

Examples of such conservatism included the establishment of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), and the project of defunding national arts organization, The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Both projects were fueled by a desire to censor sexual representation in the arts, whose acknowledgement would seem key to a broader knowledge of sexuality, and safe sex practices. Marjorie Heins describes the era of censorship during the AIDS crisis by saying, “It was tempting to find new demons among any group that challenged the imagined ‘traditional values’ utopia of our mythical past: sexual non-conformists, provocative artists, pornographers.”<sup>116</sup> Musicians and artists would comprise some of the groups targeted for their attacks on the utopia of traditional values, referenced by Heins.

The supposed mission of the PMRC was to prevent music with explicit content from being sold to minors. However, Claude Chastagner examined, “A subtle mix of moral concerns and

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<sup>113</sup> Jonathan Engel, *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 45.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Marjorie Heins, *Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy, a Guide to America's Censorship Wars* (New York: New Press, 1993), 188.

political interests on a fundamentalist backdrop, the PMRC crusade was indeed a reactionary form of censorship.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the National Endowment of the Arts had been under attack in the late 1980s by Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, among other conservatives, for disbursing public funds to organisations that had exhibited work by artists such as Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, which Helms considered obscene.<sup>118</sup> Those works included Serrano’s image, *Piss Christ* (1987), which showed a crucifix submerged in urine, and Mapplethorpe's graphic homoerotic photo series meant to comprise part of the NEA-funded exhibition, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1989 (the show was ultimately cancelled).

I must acknowledge that another conservative response to AIDS also manifested widespread homophobia. This is echoed by Engel in the following passage:

“In the early years, despite isolated incidents of homophobia and antigay violence, AIDS and AIDS victims attracted more support than opprobrium. By 1987, however, this reluctance had faded. Religious and political conservatives, leading a larger block of conservative moderates, began to attack homosexuality and homosexual behavior in a concerted effort to demonize gay lifestyles and portray gays as self-indulgent, irresponsible, and morally depraved. This conservative backlash had been simmering for a half-dozen years, and now it exploded in vitriolic and self-righteous attacks on the branded culprits.”<sup>119</sup>

Engel notes the shift of the conservative climate by 1987 toward a realisation of the homophobia that had likely been developing since the early alignment of the disease with gay men. While other aspects of the conservative backlash to the AIDS crisis were confronted directly in ways I will soon outline, I argue that combatting the homophobia of the period

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<sup>117</sup> Claude Chastagner, “The Parents' Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music*, Volume 18, Issue 2. (1999): 190.

<sup>118</sup> Lisa Henderson, “Justify Our Love: Madonna and the Politics of Queer Sex,” in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), 108.

<sup>119</sup> Engel, *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS*, 57.



was not a feasible project for musicians to undertake. Madonna's *Vogue* (1990), *Justify My Love* (1990), and *Erotica* (1990) are the most direct examples of confronting homophobia through the inclusion of androgynous and queer subjects. I will further highlight the inapproachability of homophobia through the example of George Michael, who, despite closeting his sexuality, was one of the first artists to reference AIDS awareness, and safe sex practices in his video, *I Want Your Sex* (1986).

Significantly, Hall maintains that crises such as the AIDS epidemic are pushed forward when cultural contradictions are condensed.<sup>120</sup> Silence and conservatism contradict the typical cultural response to crisis, which is to provide awareness and action. The institutional responses to the AIDS crisis—silence, homophobia, and arts censorship—were combatted in specific ways by the artists explored in this chapter. They confront the reprehensible silence of an era when sex and sexuality were consciously tied to death and shame. George Michael, Salt-N-Pepa, and TLC sought to protect the body by advocating safe-sex practices and AIDS awareness in their video. In these videos, I will explore how the literal writing of safe-sex messages utilises the Brechtian strategy, literising, and how Salt-N-Pepa and TLC perform feminist roles. Madonna provoked conservatives with her explicit sexual content and queer and feminist images. She, and Nine Inch Nails included subcultural sex practices such as BDSM and masochism in their videos, and incorporated dark aesthetics which acknowledged a morbidity of the era that was independent of the shame associated with sex by conservatives. I will explore this strategy in relationship to the theories of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who proposed that grotesque images were necessary to acknowledge and confront horrific conditions and events.

### Safe Sex

Though seemingly antithetical to much of the work explored in this text, which uses music video to combat gender norms, rather than reinforce them, I am touching briefly on George Michael's video, *I Want Your Sex* (1987) to exemplify the homophobia that sustained Michael's performance of a hetero-masculine role, and the appearance of safe-sex advocacy

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<sup>120</sup> Hall and Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis," 57.

that appears according to Engel's timeline of when the conservative backlash to AIDS begins to take shape.

Michael reflects on the private fear that informed his decision to conceal his sexuality in the following interview:

“In the years when HIV was a killer, any parent of an openly gay person was terrified. I knew my mother well enough that she would spend every day praying that I didn't come across that virus. She'd have worried like that.”<sup>121</sup>

Michael connects his sexuality to the fear of death and loss presented by AIDS and HIV. He projects this fear onto his family in defense of his actions, as well as “every parent of an openly gay person.” He addresses a broader social mentality in relation to his own attempt to protect his family by hiding his sexuality. In addition to signifying a private fear of familial trauma, Michael signifies the unwarranted public fear of the homosexual body, as an extension of a fear of AIDS and HIV during this period. The following passage of Steven Seidman's essay, “Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS & the Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality” explores the hysteria surrounding gay men as a symbol of the disease—a stereotype evaded through Michael's performance of heterosexual norms:

“The appearance of AIDS, and the recognition of its epidemic proportions by 1983 reinvigorated a waning anti-gay politics. Anti-gay themes assumed a new prominence in New Right politics as AIDS was seized upon to promote a conservative social agenda... AIDS [was] being used to advocate changes in homosexual identity and behavior... I argue that AIDS has provided a pretext to reinsert homosexuality within a symbolic drama of pollution and purity. Conservatives have used AIDS to rehabilitate the notion of ‘the homosexual’ as a polluted figure. AIDS is read as revealing the essence of a promiscuous homosexual desire and proof of its dangerous and subversive nature. The reverse side of this demonisation of homosexuality is the

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<sup>121</sup> Gillian Telling, “George Michael Says Coming Out Didn't Make His Life Easier,” *People*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20797971,00.html>.

purity of heterosexuality and the valorisation of a monogamous, marital sexual ethic.”<sup>122</sup>

In the passage above, Seidman characterises the social climate of fear and prejudice against gay men that the AIDS crisis produced. The sexually transmitted disease was used to weaponise identity. Gay men became symbols of physical and moral threat. Michael not only evades a homosexual identity, but promotes the very “purity of heterosexuality and the valorisation of a monogamous, marital sexual aesthetic” noted by Seidman in the *I Want Your Sex* video.

Michael engages with the sexual politics sparked by AIDS and HIV as his hetero-persona, despite the fact that alignment with the disease was what he supposedly feared about coming out. *I Want Your Sex* opens with a cropped body shot of a woman in a corset. The shot cuts to a woman’s face, eyes closed and smiling; then a shot of black satin sheets. The fabric gathers and recedes, implicitly with the movement of bodies—the heterosexual bodies of Michael and his female partner—entwined beneath. More direct is the image that follows. Michael ties a red ribbon over the eyes of the woman. This is, in itself a subversive sexual act marrying trust and depravation. These shots illustrate that Michael was not only willing to “dress” the part of a heterosexual man, but willing to “play” the part, representing explicit scenes of sexual activity with the woman in *I Want Your Sex*. Michael is subsequently shown, also blindfolded, in bed kissing the woman. Shots of the woman’s body being showered in water are then shown, making explicit reference to ejaculation. Michael’s body is also shown, showered in water, while the woman’s painted red nails rest on his chest. What follows is a moment of sexual advocacy, delivered in a mode still consistent with the hypersexual hetero-imitation Michael has staged throughout the video, and his career to that point. While in bed with the woman, Michael spells out “Explore” on her thigh, in red lipstick, then the word “Monogamy,” across her back [Figure 4, 5].

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<sup>122</sup> Steven Seidman, “Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS & the Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality,” *Social Text*, Issue 19. (1988): 189-190.



Figure 4: George Michael, *I Want Your Sex*, 1987



Figure 5: George Michael, *I Want Your Sex*, 1987

The last shot of the video returns to the image scrolled again in lipstick against a white background. This acts as direct response to promiscuity as causal of the spread of HIV and AIDS. Though he establishes a concern for sexual health, Michael sacrifices a position as an advocate for safe sex within the gay community, instead pushing the same message through a heteronormative agenda.

Michael would continue to perform this role until his public outing in 1998. Moreover, in addition to highlighting an early response to AIDS in music video, and the homophobia of

the period, this deliberate, and stereotypical performance of masculinity destabilises the notion that masculinity and heterosexuality stem from maleness. As Butler maintains:

“the naturalistic effects of heterosexualised genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect.”<sup>123</sup>

Butler suggests above that there is no origin from which gender is produced. Rather, the repeated imitation of heterosexualised genders gives the effect of naturalism. Though Michael's masculinity is not a product of his maleness, or homosexuality, his imitation of maleness based on what Butler calls a "phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity," relies on his conscious performance of masculinity. While the examples in this text are analysed for the specific meanings of their break from the conventions of gender performance, Michael's performance exposes the learned roles from which the artists in this text break.

I will compare Michael's mode of sexual advocacy in music video with that of female hip hop acts, Salt-N-Pepa and TLC, who promoted sexual communication and safety in videos such as *Let's Talk About Sex* (1991), and *Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg* (1993), respectively. Unlike Michael, neither group pushes monogamous, heterosexual relationships as necessarily key to AIDS prevention. In doing so, they combat homophobia by exposing the myth that promiscuity is a proclivity specific to gay men, and promote a feminist message as independent women in control of their sexuality and health. Salt-N-Pepa and TLC aligned themselves directly with the AIDS prevention movement, which was especially crucial given that they represented a community widely affected by the disease, if comparably less stigmatised by it than gay men were. In 1986, the Center for Disease Control reported that the incidence rate of AIDS among black and Hispanic subjects was three times as high as that of white subjects.<sup>124</sup> Engel also notes that research institutions were growing because the

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<sup>123</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 21.

<sup>124</sup> "Epidemiologic Notes and Reports Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) among Blacks and Hispanics -- United States," *Center for Disease Control*, October 24, 1986,

epidemic was growing. He says, “Although new infections among gay men had declined dramatically by 1990, new infections among other high-risk groups had increased even faster.”<sup>125</sup> The artists in these two musical groups used their platform from within a highly affected community to raise awareness about AIDS prevention. Their confrontation of sexual issues subverts historically expected sexual modesty from cisgender women. In expressing caution about sex, however, they do not compromise the expression of their sexuality and sexual desire. The result is a feminist self-possession underscored by messages of sexual responsibility, and social awareness.

Salt-N-Pepa’s, *Let’s Talk About Sex* video opens with a shot from within a trash can, showing a book labeled, “Talk Sex,” being discarded. The group’s members are smiling, spliced with shots of male dancers. The shot of the women giggling acknowledges the difficulty of discussing the taboo subject matter, but marks that discussion necessary by their continuation. We are returned to the shot from within the trash can, where we see a child retrieve the discarded sex book. This suggests that sex should not be a strictly “adult” topic—that sexual education is crucial to youth. The child flips through pages, revealing for the camera that “Sex” is the only word in the book, printed on every page, declaring it the inescapable topic of the video. This is juxtaposed with an image of an adult man, presumably a radio DJ, indicated by the lit “On Air” sign on the desk in front of him. The DJ has been bound and gagged, symbolizing the commercial music industry’s reluctance to address sexual issues [Figure 6]. In a subsequent scene, we see group member, Salt, has taken over the DJ’s position at the “On Air” microphone.

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<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00000810.htm>, (accessed November 15, 2014).

<sup>125</sup> Engel, *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS*, 76.



Figure 6: Salt-N-Pepa, *Let's Talk About Sex*, 1991

This scene is of note for its critique of systemic practices and hierarchies, namely those of conservative group, PMRC, introduced above. Salt takes over the male DJ's position of authority, initiating the sexual dialogue with which the DJ was reluctant to engage.

The scenes of dancing continue, showing us sexualised, free bodies. As the refrain consistently reminds us to "talk about sex," however, sexual expression is anchored to the responsibility to communicate. The group adopt various costumes throughout, which stretch the economy of femininity, and the expectations of the female gender. They portray construction workers, and catcall at male passers-by, symbolizing a penetration of a typically male profession, and the public expression of their sexual desire. In another scene, the group's DJ, Spinderella, walks by a seated row of men. She wears a skin-tight white dress, and inserts herself in between two of them, wrapping her arms around them in an act of fraternal inclusion. The shot of the group from the beginning wearing black evening apparel, with styled hair, is juxtaposed with a shot of them wearing baggy jeans and oversized men's shirts and jackets. The effect is one observed by Suzanne Bost in her discussion of similar female hip hop artist, Da Brat:

“Da Brat’s covert critique is internal to Hip Hop marketing. She molds her image to be recognizable within the stereotypical gender codes of an exhibitionist “ho” and a gun-toting ‘gangsta;’ but by fusing the two in one body, she deconstructs the binary assumed to be at their foundation. Each pole is undermined as a result: a whore cannot be a whore or an object of others’ sexual mastery, if she is also a pimp and a gangster.”<sup>126</sup>

Throughout the video, Salt-N-Pepa are, as Bost describes Da Brat to be, sexy, feminine, masculine, and able to transgress the social boundaries that these aesthetics often signify. These images challenge gender norms, while still laced with a sense of fun and energy. They lead up to the insertion of a subversive *Memento Mori*, reminding their audience of consequences of sexual irresponsibility. A fake skeleton is shown with a large, round sign outlined in red that reads: AIDS. Over the skeleton’s mouth is yellow police-style tape with the word, “censored” [Figure 7]. The image reiterates the AIDS slogan, “Silence Equals Death.” It suggests that censoring our dialogue about sex will act in direct contribution to



Figure 7: Salt-N-Pepa, *Let's Talk About Sex*, 1991

<sup>126</sup> Suzanne Bost, "'Be Deceived If Ya Wanna Be Foolish': (Re)constructing Body, Genre, and Gender in Feminist Rap," *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 12, Issue 1. (2001): 38.



AIDS-related deaths, by failing to provide knowledge about its prevention. In addition to advocating through the video, the group also released an alternate version of the song available on promotional radio singles, and some b-sides of the single, re-titled “Let’s Talk About AIDS” (1991). The following lyrics from the song combat the social silence around the disease by addressing stigmas, prevention, and contraction of the disease:

"Yo, let's talk about AIDS (go on) to the unconcerned and uninformed  
 You think you can't get it? Well you're wrong  
 Don't dismiss, dis, or blacklist the topic  
 That ain't gonna stop it  
 Now if you go about it right you just might save your life  
 Don't be uptight, come join the fight  
 We're gonna tell you how you can get it and how you won't  
 All of the dos and all of the don'ts  
 I got some news for you so listen, please  
 It's not a black, white, or gay disease  
 Are you ready, Pep? Yeah, I'm set  
 All right then, come on, bet  
 [So if you do come up HIV positive (mmm-hmmm) or have AIDS (yeah)  
 We just want you to know (what?) that there are treatments (that's right)  
 And the earlier, the sooner, detected the better off you'll be  
 Tell 'em please  
 Hey, yo, Pep, you get checked?  
 Yep, every year, G]  
 Now, you don't get AIDS from kisses, touches, mosquito bites, or huggin'  
 Toilet seats, telephones, stop buggin'  
 You get it for sex or a dirty drug needle  
 Anal or oral now, people  
 Women can give it to men and men mostly to women  
 The facts are simple, right and exact

And once you get it, there's no turnin' back for you  
 There ain't a cure so you gotta be sure  
 Protect yourself or don't have sex anymore  
 Mothers might give it to their babies through the womb  
 Or through birth, don't be an ass and assume  
 AIDS ain't got no smell or taste  
 It don't care about your race  
 You see a nice, kind face - you think you're safe?  
 I'm sorry, that's just not the case  
 There's no debate, conversate with your mate  
 And don't wait until it's too late  
 Ladies, all the ladies, louder now, help me out  
 Come on, all the ladies - let's practice safe sex, all right”<sup>127</sup>

In this version of the track, Salt-N-Pepa remind their listeners that AIDS is unrelated to race and sexuality. They outline various modes of transmission, and correct false information about the spread of the disease.

With *Let's Talk About Sex*, Salt-N-Pepa made subversive attacks on traditional feminine norms by adopting both masculine and feminine dress, and addressing explicit subject matter. They advised social awareness, while also making political jabs at the institutions (radio and the PMRC) who submitted to, and promoted censorship of such topics, during a period when their discussion was of crucial importance.

TLC took a similarly aggressive approach to safe sex awareness by subverting feminine norms in their video, *Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg* (1992). Though the title would imply a sense of inferiority by not being “too proud,” the video suggests sexual consumption, rather than availability and submission. The implication here is not that the members of TLC are concerned about whether they are desired. They are not hoping, or waiting to be chosen as

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<sup>127</sup> Salt-N-Pepa, “Let’s Talk About AIDS,” Next Plateau Records, Musical Recording, 1991.

partners, as is the thematic foundation of pop songs employed by a diverse scope of artists, ranging from R'n'B legend, Whitney Houston ("How Will I Know if he Really Loves Me" (1985)) to contemporary female-fronted garage rock band, Best Coast ("Do You Love Me Like You Used To?" (2012)). Rather, the members of TLC express concern about accessing sex, not love. In the video, several men offer gift-wrapped presents to TLC members, Lisa "Lefteye" Lopes, Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas, and Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins, as if courting them. The girls roll their eyes, and reject the gifts by throwing them to the background of the shot. The fact that they are not too proud to beg is a bold declaration of their sexual desire, not their desire to be a committed partner. This is expressed throughout the video, yet responsibly set alongside visual references to safe sex.

Similar to George Michael's use of words written in lipstick to deliver an anti-promiscuity message to his audience, TLC used graffiti-style script presented on screen for sexual expression and advice. "I wanna be touched" is the first message of the video, followed by the song's title. The words "Safe Sex" then move across the white background of the video. Using text as a kind of subtitle was another strategy advised by Brecht, and exemplified here. Brecht addresses this "literising the theatre," in the following text:

"Literising means interspersing 'construction' with 'formulation'— it gives the theatre the opportunity to make links with other institutions for intellectual activity, but can only ever be one-sided unless the audience participates in it too, and uses it to gain access to 'higher things.'"<sup>128</sup>

As explored above, the technique was meant to produce various effects. Brecht intended to break the illusion of audience immersion, and reinforce the constructed nature of performance. Like TLC, he also meant for his work to be both instructive, but suggestive to his audience in a way that they might cull their own meaning, or access "higher things" from the work.

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<sup>128</sup> Brecht, *Brecht On Theatre*, 72.

In the following passage Brecht outlines another facet of his theatrical approach, arguably enacted by TLC to subversive effect:

“The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to feelings than to the spectator’s reason. Instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must come to grips with things. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try to deny emotion to this kind of theatre. It would be much the same thing as trying to deny emotion to modern science.”<sup>129</sup>

As previously mentioned, and as Brecht references here, his audience was not meant to "share an experience," or identify with his characters in personal, or empathetic ways. The individual personalities of TLC remain similarly removed. Instead, the song focuses on encouraging reason in the face of basic sexual instinct. They appeal to their audience’s sense of reason by advocating safe sex practices despite their strong libidos which render them not "too proud to beg" for sex.

Another way that TLC advocated safe sex was by turning condoms into fashion accessories: they wore condoms to promote wearing condoms during sex. Left Eye wears a condom as an eye patch [Figure 8], and pinned to her clothes. She appropriates the contraception typically aligned with maleness, and discretion, or privacy. The act declares her responsibility for her own sexual health, and suggests that condoms are not only necessary, but—given the mainstream popularity of the group—she simultaneously renders them cool and fashionable.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 23.



Figure 8: TLC, *Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg*, 1992

In addition to condoms, the group appropriate other symbols of maleness throughout the video, which we might consider in relation to the following passage from Layli Phillips et al.'s essay, "Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop" (2005):

“A masculinist discursive strand is clearly identifiable in both rap music and its parent culture, Hip Hop. The numerical preponderance of men, combined with pre-existing masculinist scripts and sexist practices in virtually all occupational and commercial realms as well as society at large, has ensured the greater visibility of men’s prerogatives and perspectives relative to women’s in both rap music and hip hop. Due largely to masculinist biases already in place in the domains of advertising and news reporting, the public face of both hip hop and rap is masculine and the mainstream discourse of rap as hip hop’s mouthpiece is masculine.”<sup>130</sup>

From this assessment of male dominance in rap and hip hop, we might conclude that TLC adopt masculine personas only to assimilate to an already masculine culture. Bost offers a counter argument. She suggests that this kind of critique, "resembles a postmodern (or

<sup>130</sup> Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan and Dionne Patricia Stephens, “Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976-2004,” *The Journal of African American History*, Volume 90, Issue 3. (2005): 254.

Butlerian) dynamic of resistance: attacking the image from inside by revealing its inner workings.”<sup>131</sup> This seems a more accurate mode of TLC's subversion. They seem to undermine often toxic hetero-masculine stereotypes by performing these roles with child-like props. T-Boz carries a miniature football and basketball sporadically throughout, while another female character is shown with a purple, plastic baseball bat and catcher's chest guard. In another scene, T-Boz and Left Eye play catch with a toy basketball, while Chilli waves a lime green, plastic pistol.

Unlike Salt-N-Pepa, TLC never default to feminine dress in this video. Despite their masculine presentation, however, the girls use a male figure as a kind of prop to reinforce their heterosexual desire. The male figure is shown shirtless, sweaty, and flexing his muscles. In a shot of his backside, the girls approach him, and pull his jeans down to reveal a large X on white underwear, indicating his lower half as a veritable target (“X” marks the spot”). The girls have effectively subverted traditional female appearance and courting norms, while objectifying male subjects, declaring their desire for safe sex, which they also advocate to their audience.

### Erotica

Having explored how TLC and Salt-N-Pepa achieved a feminist message through their direct campaigns for safe sex in the midst of the AIDS crisis, I will now to examine a selection of videos whose dark, provocative—sometimes grotesque—sexual aesthetics subvert heteronormative standards of gender and sex through their exploration of subcultural, and queer sex practices. These videos also acknowledge the intangible fear, death, pain, and disease of the period by allowing their relationship with sex to take visual shape. Despite their discrepant styles of music, pop icon, Madonna, and industrial progenitors, Nine Inch Nails, were two of the first artists to explore these aesthetics in music video. And indeed, in the examples explored here, the music does share similar dark, moody textures—deep, bass-heavy electronics, for example—which are reinforced by the macabre video imagery. With what I qualify as Madonna's *Erotica* triptych (*Vogue* (1990), *Justify My Love* (1990), and

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<sup>131</sup> Bost, "Be Deceived if Ya Wanna be Foolish," 12.

*Erotica* (1992) and Nine Inch Nails' *Happiness in Slavery* (1992), these artists explored music video's ability to shock, not just through enticing, accepted sexual imagery, but unexpected iterations of unconventional, challenging sexual representations.

I have chosen to handle Madonna's videos for *Vogue*, *Justify My Love*, and *Erotica*, as a connected series produced during her most controversial period. The videos share a dramatic black and white aesthetic, queer and sexual themes, and become progressively more explicit. These works respond to the sexually conservative climate evidenced by the censorship of the PMRC, and the NEA, addressed above.

First of the series to be released, *Vogue*, envelops Madonna in a queer world with rampant voguing, ostentatious glamour, androgyny, and women, including Madonna, appropriating traditionally male dress. I must acknowledge before proceeding, however, that not all critics have observed the value of *Vogue* to combatting the conservative climate. Rather than establishing Madonna as a figure working against the censorship of Helms, in her chapter, "Justify Our Love: Madonna and the Politics of Queer Sex," in *The Madonna Connection*, author, Lisa Henderson critiques the queerness with which Madonna combats social norms as a construction built from questionable appropriation:

“Her plastic repertoire includes gay cultural forms, yes, but appropriated out of their organic venues (like Harlem drag and voguing balls) and into the high-return indifference of corporate cultural production (like the video *Vogue*). Many gay people will recognise the originators, but most others in the audience will not, and Madonna has not gone out of her way to credit (or remunerate) her sources.”<sup>132</sup>

Henderson implies above that Madonna's appropriations are beneficial to her in terms of aligning herself with queer culture, but that this may only be legible to those in said culture. For those in her audience unfamiliar with the gay, ballroom cultures Madonna is referencing, or arguably elevating to mainstream visibility, the queer elements of her work go unannounced, presumably to avoid evasion of her heterosexual fan base. Though a fair

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<sup>132</sup> Henderson, "Justify Our Love: Madonna and the Politics of Queer Sex," 123.

argument, I do not read Madonna's actions with the malevolence, or disregard that Henderson suggests. I see her incorporation of voguing as an act of exposure—exposing queer culture where it did not previously exist, and treating it with respect—never mockery or parody—as a new dance form. Furthermore, we might ask how an artist is meant to “credit” something like a dance move, or a cultural phenomenon. In a musical liner note? In an award speech, or television interview? Are we to expect the same acknowledgement for her appropriation of, for example, religious iconography and masculinity? It is of note that several of the lead dancers featured in the *Vogue* video went on to tour with Madonna, to be featured in her documentary *In Bed With Madonna* (1991), and to serve as subjects in a documentary about their life after the tour, *Strike a Pose* (2015). Do such achievements not amount to credit? And, while Henderson suggests that Madonna's appropriation of voguing lent to the growth of her gay fan base, there were certainly other elements—the popularity of her music, most notably—which also contributed to that growth. Henderson suggests that voguing has been incorporated as queer novelty, when, in fact, much of Madonna's career has been marked, not just by queer aesthetics, but by queer acts, language, and activism. In the following sections I will field more of Henderson's critique, and explore how Madonna continues to build the queer world explored in *Vogue* throughout the *Erotica* triptych.

*Justify My Love* depicts dream-like sexual encounters in a hotel. Figures in lingerie and bondage gear obscure gender in the wash of fantasy and eroticism. Madonna's whispered, desperate verses, confessing her desire further intensify the sexual imagery. Operating outside a more conventional pop structure, the minimal dynamics, and absence of an overt, catchy chorus also reinforce the subversive strategy of the imagery. Neither the song nor the video abide by commercial conventions. In the following passage, Henderson continues her critique of Madonna's queer representation in *Justify My Love* by suggesting that the sexual scenes are too ambiguous to be effectively confrontational:

“the sexual ambiguities, finally, are just that—ambiguous. We do not know for sure that Madonna does not kiss a woman, nor do we know for sure that she does. In a pop cultural universe that makes heterosex abundant and abundantly clear, allusions to



homosex are nice but not enough. Postmodernism's playful indeterminacy becomes gay activism's short shrift."<sup>133</sup>

I contest the skepticism of this passage on the basis that Henderson fails to place the video within the context of Madonna's videography. Madonna represents homosex explicitly in the video for *Erotica*, which would have been released before Henderson's article was published, and will be explored below. She also compromises the strength of her argument somewhat, by allowing for the consideration of the absence of queer representation in the vast majority of music videos at the time. The author identifies how Madonna combats norms within the medium, and in a broader social context by saying that, "In its sexual stances, *Justify My Love* defies some of music video's worst clichés, opening up an aesthetic and political corner for other ways of envisioning sex in popular culture."<sup>134</sup> With this quote, Henderson asserts that Madonna sanctifies new visions of sexuality by pushing the standards of the music video genre. And, though she critiques Madonna's queer representation as inadequate for failing to portray queer sex, she proceeds to identify Madonna's own sexual agency as combatting the homophobia that, presumably, as the explicit representation of homosex would also aim to do:

"Madonna's representation...can signify the liberating (versus culpable) "bad girl" who refuses to secure her legitimacy by denying or relinquishing sexual agency, who, indeed, empowers herself, in part, by claiming that agency against homophobia, racism, puritanism, and sexual violence."<sup>135</sup>

Here, Henderson suggests that the power of Madonna's provocative sexual agency, used to combat conservative norms, can be extended to other subjugated groups who also seek acceptance and recognition. Oddly, Henderson approves of Madonna's sexuality being used to combat homophobia, but problematises her own expressions of queerness as inauthentic appropriation, and inadequate for its ambiguity. There is further contradiction in Henderson's

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 115.

argument, as she proceeds to criticise Madonna's construction of an environment where that sexual agency is explored.

Henderson negatively describes the brothel-like hotel where the video takes place as a venue where the sale of sexual services has long-benefitted men, and subjugated women as sexual and economic property.<sup>136</sup> This quote is somewhat troubling for its totalising condemnation of female sex work. She asserts that Madonna separates power and coercion without separating power and sex. From this perspective, moreover, the clip signifies desire beyond the negative and threatening meanings of female sexual objectification, though such meanings are not necessarily or entirely displaced.<sup>137</sup> This assessment is predicated upon a fictional narrative, where Madonna plays a character—perhaps a prostitute. I would like to suggest the alternate reading that Madonna Louise Ciccone is playing *Madonna*—developing the provocative persona used to market herself, and service a queer feminist politics at risk during the time of video's release. This reading does not necessarily negate the relationship between power and sex that Henderson suggests, but it establishes Madonna—a queer woman—as the figure in control.

Madonna's *Erotica* expands and proliferates the queer, and explicit images in *Justify My Love*. Madonna also includes similar musical textures of vamped whispers, as in *Justify My Love*, but the song's catchier, repeated chorus creates a dissonance between the challenging images, and the immediately palatable, and memorable chorus and melody. We see Madonna in the opening shot, masked, behind a shimmering, metallic curtain. The following shot shows Madonna in lingerie, straddling a male figure, seated in a chair in a masculine study. The two kiss, and disrobe each other, before the scene fades again, back to the shimmering curtain, where the word "Erotica" is scrolled across the screen. A full body shot of Madonna shows her, still masked, wearing a man's tie, with a whip in hand. Her short blond hair is slicked back, and she appears as a vaguely androgynous dominatrix. Within the first seconds of the video, Madonna has destabilised gender norms, adopting masculine dress while dominating her male lovers, and established an intensely theatrical sexual landscape. She

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 116.

renders us creeps and voyeurs (inclusionary and accepted roles in the already scandalous world in which we are immersed), compelled to watch the taboo scenes for their inherent eroticism and rich images.

The dark aesthetic of the video reflects the stereotypically “bad” or “sinful” connotation of sexual fantasy; and queer sex, more pointedly. The consistent glamourisation of the characters, however, subverts those negative connotations while acknowledging a separation from convention through lurid imagery. Madonna theatricalises something of the totality of sexuality, including drag, bondage, roleplay, homosexual, and group sexual encounters. She explores subculture and desire typically avoided by mainstream artists. In doing so she reflects the Artaudian strategy of exploring the extremity of one's interior:

“The theatre will never find itself again except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. [...] If theatre wants to find itself needed once more, it must present everything in love, crime, war and madness.”<sup>138</sup>

The range of erotic fantasy in *Erotica*, reflects Artaud's conception above of the "truthful precipitates of dreams" that theatre requires to "find itself." Though the scenes and aesthetics signal the deviant nature of her subjects, Madonna unveils honest facets of sexuality, rarely seen in mainstream media. She elevates and legitimises these truths and fantasies through her extreme visibility and success.

Images flash of Madonna with a whip in her mouth, smiling subversively into the camera, implying that she will derive pleasure from its sadistic use. An effeminate, muscular male dancer is shown dancing, and pressing himself up against a mirror with cigarette in hand—his masculine appearance subverted by his unexpected vanity and grace. A couple in formal

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<sup>138</sup> Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 92

dress watch the male dancer, whose movement is sped up and distorted, before they kiss in the audience. Madonna is shown kissing model, Isabella Rossellini, the male figure from the opening scene, and a butch woman with a shaved head. Another supermodel, Naomi Campbell appears behind Madonna, grabbing her body while looking into the camera in a provocative motion of sexual possession. Madonna reaches her arm behind her, grabbing Campbell around the neck, as we see her twist her head, and push her tongue out toward Campbell's mouth. These exchanges with Rossellini and Campbell again reinforce the queer current of the video, particularly subversive given that, as models, these women represent classic objects of desire for heterosexual males.

In the proceeding scenes, Madonna is shown pouring hot wax over the chest of a man, whose arms have been tied above his head. The woman with the shaved head is shown with a doppelganger, and Madonna on a mattress, with rope lying next to it. The woman is shown again, standing over a kneeling Madonna, literally pulling her jaw open in front of her pelvis. Madonna puts on a leather mask, and kneels on her hands and knees in a bondage apparatus that allows a man to bridle her like a horse, hold reins attached to its metal loops, and straddle her back [Figure 9].



Figure 9: Madonna, *Erotica*, 1992

The muscular male figure also wears a leather bondage harness. The scene changes, presenting her in an evening gown, assuming the dominant roll, again with the whip, holding reigns linked to what appears to be a dozen nude male bodies. Madonna takes on yet another S&M-style costume with a leather biking cap and chaps. She dons a punk-style, spiked collar, held to the wall behind her with heavy metal chains. In a frontal shot she looks directly into the camera from her restricted position, rolling her tongue around the edge of her mouth, as if declaring her ability to sexually provoke despite having assumed a submissive position.

Another subversive pairing Madonna includes is a scene in her evening gown where she sits on the lap of man, presumably in his 70s, who touches her body and face. She has assumed the position of a call girl, though, given the various positions of power she has adopted throughout the video, it is unclear to what extent she is truly at the man's service, or simply playing yet another role where sexual power is exchanged and explored. The words "I'll teach you how to" are shown on screen in a Brechtian style of literising, concluding with an image of Madonna waving her finger in denial at the camera, as the word "Sex" appears. The video concludes with a shot of Madonna hitch-hiking naked in Miami, Florida.

As introduced above, the merits of *Erotica* are undeniably Artaudian. Artaud explains:

"The Theatre of Cruelty proposes to resort to mass spectacle; to see in the agitation of tremendous masses... We want to make out of the theater a believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bite which all true sensation requires."<sup>139</sup>

"Mass spectacle and agitation of tremendous masses" have been central to Madonna's career. I have explored some of the specific visual elements of spectacle above. Her ability to agitate

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 125.

the masses has been evidenced by MTV's ban of *Erotica* and *Justify My Love*.<sup>140</sup> Madonna elicits shock and sexual arousal. She exposes the performative nature of sex: the numerous costumes—leather masks, whips, chains, etc., as well as choreographed exchanges of dominant and submissive roles. By creating elaborate performances of fantasy scenarios, her manipulation also exposes how the regulated social norms being broken and re-defined, are just as actively “performed.” Whether outrage or arousal, Madonna produces the “true sensation” of Artaudian strategy.

I would like to consider one final passage from Henderson, who, despite her appreciation of elements of Madonna's work, denies her queer agency for its production within the mainstream:

“For some, Madonna is an emblem of sexual resistance, an embodiment of the same in-your-face sexuality evoked by Queer Nation’s slogan, ‘We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.’...Unlike other contemporary pop stars, moreover, Madonna seems to want her lesbian and gay fans. Still she inhabits gay consciousness as a popular guest, despite her status elsewhere as cultural proprietor, and thus her gay presence reveals something about the politics and dynamics of cultural appropriation.”<sup>141</sup>

Though I generally agree with Henderson’s observations, it is worth clarifying that I would interpret what Henderson qualifies as Madonna’s “queer appropriation,” as an act of the artist’s own self-exposure as queer. In this context, furthermore, the *Erotica* video is less about co-opting the queer market—an implication of Henderson’s text—than about acknowledging sexual subculture (gays, lesbians, the S&M community, sex workers), and maximizing sexual imagery as a powerful attack on, and protest of, the conservative right. Given the circumstances of the era, with the PMRC censoring music, and funding being cut

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<sup>140</sup> Pat Pemberton, "10 Banned Music Videos," *Rolling Stone*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/10-banned-music-videos-20130509>. (accessed December 2, 2016).

<sup>141</sup> Henderson, "Justify Our Love," 108-109.

for artists, Madonna's work combats the campaigns of the American right. She aligns herself with its targets as an act of support and defense.

*Erotica* delivers the affirmation of same sex encounters, which Henderson critiques *Justify My Love* for representing less explicitly. The various issues of queer representation that Henderson delves into are precisely the sites I recognise as the valuable subversions to gender norms inserted in the landscape of the popular. I find this achieved not just through the sexually provocative nature of Madonna's own identity, but through the complex performances she stages in video, where queer culture is elevated and sanctified, and binaries destroyed through same sex encounters, and experiments in subcultural role play.

#### Pain

As in *Erotica*, Nine Inch Nails' (NIN) video, *Happiness in Slavery* (1990) incorporates similar dark, sexual imagery based on power dynamics, and the inter-play of pleasure and pain. In the work of NIN, however, the focus is on pain *as* the sexual experience rather than part of it—part of the kissing, touching, dancing, and scenes in bed that are included in Madonna's work. As such, the music is more frenetic; the faster pace and industrial beats matches the psycho-sexual intensity of the scene. It should also be noted that the title of NIN's song is taken from a chapter of the classic erotic novel by Pauline Reage, *The Story of O* (1974); about a woman who commits herself to a submissive sexual lifestyle, only to realise her control in being the object of her lovers' desire and devotion. Also of note is the video's star, Bob Flanagan, a performance artist known for his masochistic work, which he felt mirrored the pain caused by his struggle with cystic fibrosis. By using Flanagan as the star, a relationship is drawn between sex, pleasure, and disease; which mirrors various facets of the AIDS epidemic.

The video begins with lead singer, Trent Reznor in a jail-like cell. Black and white floral imagery precede onanistic industrial gears grinding and pumping, creating a subversive juxtaposition of natural and mechanical symbols of fertility and production. We see Flanagan's character enter a deteriorated, windowless room in a suit. In the center of the

room is an antique medical examination table—an indication that the character is somehow “sick.” Flanagan places a dark rose at an altar where he lights a candle, then removes his clothes. As if purifying himself, he washes his body before a mirror, where his image recedes into the distance, ultimately disappearing, which foreshadows his death. Extremely rare is the exposure of Flanagan's full frontal nudity, which, in addition to the video's extreme violence, contributed to the video being banned by MTV upon its release.

Flanagan lies down on the table, which turns suddenly mechanical. His body is tilted upright, and he is locked in at his wrists [Figure 10]. A close-up shot of his hand shows metal



Figure 10: Bob Flanagan in Nine Inch Nail's *Happiness in Slavery*, 1992

carpenter's nails driving slowly into his flesh. Flanagan's face cringes, communicating the ecstatic pain, which he has knowingly committed himself to. A metal claw is positioned over Flanagan, gripping parts of his chest. Another metal grip pulls at his testicles. The claw makes another motion, diving into his chest, drawing blood, and pulling away part of his flesh. Blood drips into the pile of dead flowers around the table. Worms flash before the screen alluding to Flanagan's death and burial. The machine's attack continues until we are shown an overhead shot of Flanagan's splayed body. The metal sides of the machine fold



over the corpse. The body is then presumably ground within the makeshift coffin before the remnants exit the machine, again into the pile of worms and flowers. Reznor is shown entering the room, and beginning the same ritual placement of the rose and candle completed by Flanagan, suggesting that the cycle will begin again.

The aesthetics employed by NIN are grotesque, shocking, and subversively interlaced with masochistic eroticism. Texts by authors who have observed other mediums through similar lenses are of note here for having reinforced the value of exploring Artaud's cruelty in a more literal visual sense. These include Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty* (2011) and Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin* (1998). Nelson uses Artaud's manifesto, "The Theatre of Cruelty," as her dominant lens. She identifies work of a literally violent nature, exemplary of Artaud's attention to shaking his audience. In discussion of Francis Bacon, Nelson makes a point about Artaudian works in the following passage:

“Welcome to Bacon's bracing allure (which resembles that of Artaud, and of Nietzsche) which posits this "violent return to life" as a way to restore us, or deliver us anew, to an un-alienated, unmediated flow of existence characterised by a more authentic relation to the so-called real. Unlike so many avant-gardists and revolutionaries, however, Bacon does not think or hope that this restored vitality will bring about the subsequent waning of inequalities, injustices or radical forms of suffering.”<sup>142</sup>

What Nelson points out above is that the reality exposed by these works of art may not necessarily be an easier one in which to exist. Bringing awareness to ‘inequalities, injustices, and suffering’ does not make them less problematic, but rather—through their visibility and acknowledgement—more present than before. In the following passage, the same issue of unveiling reality is taken up by O'Dell, whose book explores masochism in the performance work of Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and the collaborations of Marina Abramovic and Ulay:

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<sup>142</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 9.

“Masochism blows the whistle on institutional frameworks that trigger it and within which it is practiced. Given the historical contexts of these performances, then, artists such as [Chris] Burden seemed to be urging their viewers to pay attention to these facts: battles cannot be waged without sadists and masochists; soldiers at war in Vietnam are merely sadists and masochists by other names and the military is an institution established to train sanction and glorify sadists and masochists.”<sup>143</sup>

This passage echoes Nelson’s by asserting that masochistic art only lifts the veil on masochism within our culture and its institutions. In this regard, these works are unified not in solving a problem, but in exposing it through a coded visual vernacular. I suggest that Nine Inch Nail, and Bob Flanagan also speak through this vernacular. On the surface, they expose subversive, sexual acts of masochism into the mainstream, but also make the pointed attempt at signifying the "institutional framework" which pathologises sex and AIDS.

Similar artistic tactics were used by playwright and performance theorist, Friedrich Dürrenmatt who created Theatre of the Grotesque. One of the major tenets of his work was “paradox,” which we see mirrored in the pairing of pleasure and pain in *Happiness in Slavery*. Dürrenmatt elaborates on his idea of paradox, and its effective use in performance in the following passage:

“Tragedy presumes guilt, need, proportion, control, and responsibility...Our world has led us to the grotesque just as to the atomic bomb...Indeed, the grotesque is only ostensible expression, a demonstrable paradox, the form of something formless, the face of a faceless world, and just as thinking no longer seems to get along without the concept of the paradox, so art exists side by side with the world, as the world exists side by side with the atomic bomb: from fear from it.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Kathy O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 55.

<sup>144</sup> Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Problems of the Theatre* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 47-48.

For Dürrenmatt, and I argue for NIN, performance of the grotesque gives shape and symbol to intangible destruction and horror. Dürrenmatt notes the creative property of art as paradoxical to this particular task, though, compares it to our creation of the atomic bomb, which is antithetical to our very existence. NIN's fusion of pleasure and pain expresses the paradox and of sex during the AIDS crisis. The productive, and pleasurable capacities of sex are paradoxical to its threat of disease. Our act of creation doubles, paradoxically, as a threat of self-destruction. In his essay, "Aesthetics and the Grotesque," Edward Diller elaborates on Dürrenmatt's work in the following passage:

"Paradox and grotesquerie are more than stylistic devices for Dürrenmatt: they are his reaction to a world which, in contrast to earlier times, has lost all unity, has become chaotic beyond all comprehension, and therefore, terrifying."<sup>145</sup>

We might further identify a similar "lack of unity" identified by Diller in Dürrenmatt's work in the anti-gay backlash that favored demonisation of homosexuals during the AIDS crisis rather than compassionate support. That sort of failure of human nature combined with the physically grotesque effects of the disease might be considered two examples of the terror identified by Diller. In this capacity, the grotesque, and likely the grotesque images in *Happiness in Slavery* are used to hold a mirror up to our "chaos" in hopes of correcting it.

The videos explored above were released during a period when the dangers of sex were deflected onto our dialogues about it. Rather than succumb to the palpable fear of loss, to silence, or to scenes and images that might distract their audience from these sensitive issues, these artists used the medium of music video to confront, subvert, empower, communicate. That communication took various shapes through performance. Though acts such as Salt-N-Pepa and TLC made their message explicit, clear, and direct, they, and the other artists discussed here also achieved subversive effects through the use of props and the body as sign and symbol. The value of subversion can be drawn back to the theories of Brecht, Artaud,

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<sup>145</sup> Edward Diller, "Aesthetics and the Grotesque: Friedrich Dürrenmatt," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 7.3 (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 328.

and Dürrenmatt, who all demanded greater awareness from their audiences. Brecht wanted to break the illusion. Artaud promoted a visceral experience that would shock us into thought, and Dürrenmatt tried to hold an alarming mirror image up to his audience as social confrontation. In discussion of HIV positive artist, Ron Athey's live performance work, which often involves piercing and incising the skin to the point of bleeding, John Edward McGrath explains:

“We can learn from Athey's performance. In putting everything on the surface—death, religion, sex...his work indicates a life practice which does not use spatial metaphors of the deep, the hidden, the terrible to hold at a distance our most profound experiences.”<sup>146</sup>

Shared amongst the works explored above is this intention McGrath outlines, of confronting an audience with that which might be hideous and perverse, to demand respect for life that is vulnerable and fragile.

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<sup>146</sup> John Edward McGrath, "Trusting in Rubber: Performing Boundaries During the AIDS Epidemic," *TDR: The Dramatic Review*, Volume 39, Issue 2 (Boston: MIT Press, 1995), 36.

## Chapter II

### Gender Proliferation, Marriage Equality, and the Internet

“To you they crawl, body sprawl, smokin' Pall Malls, close call, stand tall Doll, you make them feel so small. And they love it. The boys wanna be her. The girls wanna be her. I wanna be her. Yes I do.”<sup>147</sup>

#### Part I: Proliferation

This chapter focuses on work made since 2003, and the cultural conditions which have accommodated a queer strategy of gender subversion proposed by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler calls for a "radical proliferation of gender"<sup>55</sup> to displace gender norms. This chapter seeks to establish the landscape of contemporary music video as a vital site where this radical proliferation, and displacement occurs in ways that are unique to the medium, and on an unparalleled scale. What other media deploys such a compelling lexicon of queer and feminist representation with the same level of visibility? How is this achieved? In the examples we will explore below, a myriad of genders, and sexual identities are realised through a theatricalisation of feminism and queerness that relies on an Artaudian approach. Social norms and limits are displaced in aggressive and phantastic ways via the agency of performance, implicating the theatricality of the most basic gender roles, and the instability of gender categories outside the context of music video.

To explore these claims, we will examine individual works, and trends among artists' representations, which establish gender identities outside the historical binary. This chapter is necessarily somewhat survey-like; it highlights the breadth of variation in performed genders. I have also selected four videos to explore in a second section of this chapter, whose attacks on gender roles, standards of femininity, and heteronormativity warrant individual analysis

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<sup>147</sup> Peaches, "Boys Wanna be Her," *Impeach My Bush*, XL Recordings, Musical Recording, 2006.

for their radicality: Lady Gaga's *Alejandro* (2010), M.I.A.'s *Bad Girls* (2012), and Brooke Candy's *Opulence* (2014).

What specific queer and feminist meaning can be drawn from analyzing the details of these works? And, how do we account for the deployment of Butler's strategy at this specific point in time? To begin, let us consider how social and technological shifts may have accommodated, or contributed to the unprecedented proliferation of identities in recent music videos.

### Technological Shift

The ways in which the technological developments of the early 2000s changed music video's modes of production, distribution, consumption, and regulation are all inextricably linked to the proliferation of subversive gender representations in the medium. Perhaps most significant among these developments was the launch of the audience-curated website, YouTube, in 2005. For independent artists and directors, the site provided a place to distribute music and video, legitimizing the DIY production of media that could suddenly be accessed as easily as work by mainstream artists. The implications of a popular, and open forum for queer artists—historically marginalised by commercial industries—to represent themselves, and their work, is explored in the following passage by Jean Burgess, in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009):

"YouTube is big enough, and global enough, to count as a significant mediating mechanism for the cultural public sphere...the website is an enabler of encounters with cultural differences and the development of political 'listening' across belief systems and identities."<sup>148</sup>

Though Burgess does not reference queer artists specifically, what he proposes above is that YouTube is a social mediator, which accommodates encounters with cultural difference. As

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<sup>148</sup> Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 77.

it relates to this research, we might qualify queerness, alternative expressions and practices of sexuality, and the 'belief systems and identities' referenced by Burgess, amongst those differences. As an arena largely populated by the content of its users, YouTube has offered an unprecedented channel through which to present, and access queer media, and to engage with cultural differences historically avoided, or censored by mainstream media. This is reinforced by artist, Peaches, who compares the access to her music videos previously offered by TV stations, to the access afforded by lack of censorship on YouTube, by stating, "My videos were played after 11 o'clock at night. There were restrictions, there were rules. Now there aren't any rules because you can put [music videos] on YouTube."<sup>149</sup> Peaches references her own work, which exemplifies the queer media YouTube has made more accessible. Other examples of queer videos on YouTube range from videos of queer subjects coming out, and documentation of queer family life, to lesbians discussing their relationship on camera, and a mother reading her son's Grindr messages.<sup>150</sup> Peaches specifies the website's lack of censorship as the reason for access to such media, and highlights that work such as hers would previously have been censored for content, and screened for the limited audiences of late-night television.

While distribution of, and access to, independent, queer and feminist media is of the most significant contributions of YouTube to amateur musicians, directors, and their audiences, the site's specific benefits to the major corporations of the music industry are explored by Carol Vernallis in her book, *Unruly Media* (2013). Vernallis traces the significant progression from the downturn of the music industry in the early 2000s, to the subsequent softening of regulations to which music video had historically adhered, and how this allowed for the production, and distribution of more controversial work. As a result of the loss of profit caused by illegal downloading of music through websites such as Napster and Pirate Bay during this time, the budgets for music videos were severely reduced in turn. Through

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<sup>149</sup> David Friend, "Q&A: Peaches on Queer Imagery and Getting Yanked from YouTube," *The Montreal Gazette*, September 13, 2016, <http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/qa-peaches-on-queer-imagery-and-getting-yanked-from-youtube>.

<sup>150</sup> Richard Lawson, "Why Are There So Many Gay People on YouTube?," *Vanity Fair*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/06/youtube-digest-june-26>.

the addition of advertisements played before a viewer's selected content, YouTube allowed the music industry to monetise the medium online, and recoup some of the losses on music sales. Several record companies also banded together to create a similar site, Vevo,<sup>151</sup> where directors could incorporate product placement for additional revenue.<sup>152</sup> Whereas music videos were previously used as advertisements for the sale of the song for which they were made, they now had their own monetary potential. Garnering online traffic justified a renewed investment in the visual economy of an artist.

With this growth of the online viewing platform, the necessity of adhering to the regulations imposed by television stations such as MTV became less crucial. Vernallis provides a portrait of the obstacles faced by artists and directors before the existence of YouTube and similar sites:

"In the eighties and nineties, music videos were primarily seen on a few satellite services— like MTV, BET, or VH1— or in a countdown on broadcast television late at night, and it was difficult for record companies to get their clips on the air. To make MTV rotation, clips were first vetted by a board of ten, then had to clear the Standards and Practices division. Consciously or unconsciously, directors and artists tailored their work for these committees...Directors and musicians could never predict which constraints would be enforced. For example, no alcohol or product placement was supposed to appear on MTV...Some forms of smooching and T&A were okay, others not."<sup>153</sup>

In this section, Vernallis highlights the tenuous relationship between censorship and distribution. Music videos had to meet certain standards, even to be considered for rotation on what was a severely limited number of outlets, each with their own styles of programming.

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<sup>151</sup> Though audiences are not able to upload their own content to Vevo, I have qualified the site as similar to YouTube for the ability offered to audiences to curate their own selection of content for viewing.

<sup>152</sup> Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 14.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 208



Most important to this research, she notes the lack of clarity around the representation of sexuality and physicality (colloquially referenced by her as "smooching" and "T&A" (tits and ass), respectively). While the banning of Madonna's *Justify My Love* (1990) video for its explicit sexual content has become somewhat legendary—a sufficient promotional tool in itself—at the time, few artists could have sacrificed the support of MTV in a similar way as Madonna did. In an industry where MTV visibility was, as Vernallis suggests, intensely competitive for its promotional value, incorporating sexually provocative material could prove an unjustified risk. By contrast, she explores the current role of censorship on YouTube in the following passage:

"There is little vetting of clips. Except for concerns about copyright violations (a constant struggle), prosumers feel free to upload a range of material that confounds genres. For example, many clips with full-frontal nudity remain up even though YouTube viewers can flag them."<sup>154</sup>

In this quote, Vernallis notes YouTube's lack of censorship, which is controlled to a significant extent by its viewers, who have the option to "flag" offensive material for the site's administrators to review. It is of note here that Peaches and Mykki Blanco have both had music videos censored by YouTube.<sup>155</sup> Their works were flagged by viewers, and removed. However, unlike MTV, which would permanently remove a censored video, YouTube allowed Peaches' *Rub* (2015) and Blanco's *Loner* (2016) to go back onto the site after the flags were reviewed.

In addition a decrease in regulation, online distribution of music videos has also increased. Commercial websites such as Vevo, Hulu, Launch, and Pitchfork, are among the dozens of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 208

<sup>155</sup> Colin Stutz, "Mykki Blanco's *Loner* Back on YouTube After Calling Out Video's 'homophobic Removal,'" *Billboard*, December 2, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7597332/mykki-blanco-loner-video-youtube-removal>.

additional outlets where music videos are now dispersed.<sup>156</sup> As we will further explore throughout the chapter, the images in music video have responded to greater freedom to explore previously regulated content. Brooke Candy's *Opulence* (2014), and Rhianna's *Bitch Better Have My Money* (2015) are two such examples, which include queer sexuality, acts of extreme violence by female protagonists, and nudity. These works experiment with gendered representations which confront the static binary whose representation in music video was effectively required by the outlets that distributed them. Change in regulations has triggered the production of more provocative content, while YouTube's open platform for distribution and consumption has proved integral to allowing amateur musicians and directors to produce, consume, and distribute queer work.

The technological factors which saw returned revenue to music video, and greater license to visual content occurred in conjunction with dramatic social change, which may also have informed the queer and feminist content of contemporary work. The videos exemplify a growing consciousness of gender rights and roles, evidenced by a period whose radicalism can be measured in definitive political change.

#### Same-Sex Marriage

In 2015, same-sex marriage was legalised throughout the United States after the Supreme Court ruled state-level bans to be unconstitutional. Same sex marriage has been legal in the United Kingdom since 2013. Since the first legalisation of same-sex marriage in an American state in 2003, the extremity and prevalence of subversive representations of gender has increased in both commercial music videos, and in those by artists outside the mainstream, reinforcing its relevance as a period of study. While it is not my intention to establish causality between same sex marriage rights and music video directly, the parallel progression poses relevant questions of cultural assimilation. Has queer culture penetrated popular culture as a bi-product of greater gender and sexual equality that we might see as confirmed by same-sex marriage rights? Is it a more tenuous relationship of hetero-commercial culture co-opting the queer market through its representation, while reinforcing the illusion of

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

superiority by acting as gatekeepers to other social structures and ceremonies, such as marriage? Or, is music video a platform for anti-assimilation—a place where queer representations combat heteronormative conformity? Similar questions about which audience these images ultimately serve come up with regard to the hyper-sexual depiction of women in music video: are they feeding a patriarchal desire for objectified bodies and skin, or reinforcing their sexual agency in a third wave of feminist defiance? In order to explore these questions, I will first examine the work produced within this period of cultural shift. I will now further position this study in relation to Butler's consideration of gender proliferation before beginning the analysis of the objects of study.

### Categories

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) elaborates on the concepts of gender performance and performativity first introduced in her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988). Butler asserts that gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed, but rather an identity tenuously constituted in time.<sup>157</sup> She elaborates on this in the following passage:

“Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* Volume 40, Issue 4 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988) 519.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

In this chapter, we will consider the numerous and extreme ways that this “breaking or subversive repetition” of a performance of gender is executed in music video.

The works considered in this chapter have been organised into a rough categorical index of queer and feminist representations. Though Butler encourages the proliferation of gender identities, it should be acknowledged that this particular method of research contradicts her opposition to "categories." She explains:

"Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression"<sup>159</sup>

In this passage, Butler illuminates the restrictive capacity of categories to be oppressive, or co-opted toward a political agenda. She later clarifies, however, that a category may be acceptable, but that she prefers that it be 'permanently unclear what it signifies.'<sup>160</sup> Though this chapter explores gendered aesthetics under categorical headings, the intention is neither prescriptive, nor finite. This aesthetic inventory seeks less to populate new categorical meanings than to make the signification of the historical binary more "permanently unclear." In the following examples we will explore the proliferation subversive gender identities and the theatrical strategies employed to achieve them.

### Queer Feminism

I qualify Queer Feminist representations as work made by artists who self-identify as women, though may not be a sexed female, heterosexual, or whose performance of the female gender does not readily play into a hetero-normative model of beauty or desire. What this category rejects—the historically limited archetype of a woman—is perhaps necessarily more clear than what it is.

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<sup>159</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

One of the most iconic figures in this discussion is Lady Gaga. Her early videos such as *Beautiful and Dirty Rich* (2008) and *Just Dance* (2008) present her as a carefree leader whose outlandish image, and catchy choruses laid the foundation for the identity she continued to develop visually. Between 2009 and 2012, Lady Gaga released 11 music videos dominated by extravagant, defiant representations of gender and sexuality. In an interview in 2013, she reiterated statements made earlier in her career identifying her queer sexuality saying, “I like girls. I've said that. I know people think I just say things to be shocking, but I actually do like pussy.”<sup>161</sup> Perhaps most indicative of a queer feminist approach to gender representation are her roles as lesbian prisoner making out with a fellow inmate in *Telephone* (2010) [Figure 11], an androgynous, celibate, bionic widow, turned nun in *Alejandro* (2010) [Figure 12], and a drag king, as her male persona, Joe Calderone in *Yoü and I* (2011) [Figure 13].



Figure 11: Lady Gaga, *Telephone*, 2010

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<sup>161</sup> Aaron Day, "Lady Gaga: 'I've taken a few dips in the Lady Pond,'" *Pink News*, September 13, 2013, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/09/12/lady-gaga-ive-taken-a-few-dips-in-the-lady-pond-lesbians-are-way-more-daring-than-straight-men/>



Figure 12: Lady Gaga, *Alejandro*, 2010



Figure 13: Lady Gaga, *Yoü and I*, 2011

These works express the instability of binary gender categories (she plays not only man and woman, but machine and mermaid in these videos), defy expectations of femininity and womanhood, and proliferate gender identities across the medium. These works also reinforce Butler's assertions that 'the appearance of substance is simply a created identity.'<sup>162</sup> Though

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<sup>162</sup>Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

Lady Gaga's core "substance" may be consistent across these identities, it is through performance that she defies the myth that identity is produced from that substance.

Vital to the production of these identities is the Artaudian strategy discussed in the introduction as one of the elements that unifies the work explored in this thesis. In the following passage, Catherine Dale elaborates on Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, and explains his intentions to rebuild a theatre based on the kind of 'extreme action pushed beyond limits,' dramatised by Lady Gaga in relation to the limits of gender norms:

"Artaud's peculiar conception of cruelty devotes itself to a pitiless persistence toward the production of thought. Rather than relate simply to the production of pain and suffering where cruelty is regarded as a cause, that is, producing effective torment, Artaud's Cruelty is a form of severity in thought diligent and strict: 'cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.'"<sup>163</sup>

In this passage, Dale discusses the thought-provoking severity exemplified by Lady Gaga's images as characteristic of Artaudian work. But, does Lady Gaga's own intellectual telology mirror the perceived effects of her work? In consideration of Lady Gaga's own intentions, I would like to compare her performances of these characters with how she outlines the motivations behind her songwriting. She explains writing the track, "Born This Way" (2011) in the following quote from her interview with *Billboard Magazine*:

"I want to write my this-is-who-the-fuck-I-am anthem, but I don't want it to be hidden in poetic wizardry and metaphors. I want it to be an attack, an assault...Harkening back to the early '90s, when Madonna, En Vogue, Whitney Houston and TLC were making very empowering music for women and the gay community and all kind of

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<sup>163</sup> Catherine Dale, "CRUEL: Antonin Artaud and Gilles Deleuze" in Brian Massumi, *A Shock to Thought* (London: Routledge, 2002) 5.

disenfranchised communities... That's the kind of record I need to make. That's the record that's going to shake up the industry.”<sup>164</sup>

As she expresses in this quote, her desire to make an “attack” reflects the severe theatrical approach of Artaud. Furthermore, what she strives for with this attack—a sense of empowerment for women, the gay community, and other disenfranchised communities—she also seeks to achieve in the subversive representations of gender and sexuality in the above examples of Lady Gaga's videos. I suggest that Lady Gaga's images, and her expression of intentions to produce progressive social affect employ an Artaudian strategy crucial to actualizing Butler's theories.

Author Richard J. Gray II further reinforces Lady Gaga's use of Artaudian strategy in his chapter, “Surrealism, The Theater of Cruelty and Lady Gaga” in *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*:

Gaga’s work embraces Antonin Artaud’s Surrealist notion of a Theatre of Cruelty functioning as an intense physical attempt to expose the metaphysical and sacred dimensions of theatre. The very life and work of Antonin Artaud resonates in Lady Gaga’s performance identity. Gaga’s performance identity itself becomes an Artaudian act of cruelty.”<sup>165</sup>

Gray suggests that "metaphysical and sacred dimensions of theatre" are subject to exposure by surrealist physicalities. Lady Gaga's surrealist physicalities might include the costumes, makeup, masks, or sets utilised to create the acts of cruelty which theatricalise gender and sexuality in a way that confronts the construction of their historically limited models. But, what is meant by Gray's suggestion that these physicalities expose metaphysical and sacred dimensions? Later in his text, Gray references these dimensions of theatre as experiential. He

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<sup>164</sup> Bill Werde, "Lady Gaga 'Born This Way' Cover Story," *Billboard Magazine*, April 18, 2011, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Richard J. Gray II, "Surrealism, The Theater of Cruelty, and Lady Gaga," in *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*, 130.



asserts that Lady Gaga's audiences undergo an emotional upheaval.<sup>166</sup> Though he devotes his text to unpacking her performance merits and strategies, he never specifies exactly what resonates with audiences. I would like to consider gender as one of these sacred and metaphysical dimensions of theatre, whose rare exposure and acceptance as performance opens identity to new possibility.

Gray locates Lady Gaga's subversive strategies at the intersection of pop culture and the classical avant-garde. His text affirms the capacity of popular performance to be read through dramatic theory, and suggests the unrealised discourse to be culled from this approach. The popular frenzy that Lady Gaga has incited over representational extremity, however, has not only produced new performance discourse, but queer feminist scholarship as well. I see this as further evidence of Artaud's requirement of performance to produce thought. In *Gaga Feminism* (2012), Jack Halberstam drafts a new credo of feminism inspired by Lady Gaga. They also asserts the landscape of popular culture as a historic, and important battleground for queer activism. This is explored in the following passage:

“The American lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer movement has never been only a movement about civil rights. From its beginnings in the 1950s, groups like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis understood the power of popular culture. The gay liberation movement of the 1970s understood that the way to political power was through popular culture.”<sup>167</sup>

This passage reinforces popular music performance (and its modes of documentation, such as music video) as a potent site for activating cultural change. Halberstam continues to outline the feminism envisioned in a post-Gaga society in the following passage:

“Gaga feminism is a politics that brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females. It is a scavenger

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>167</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), ix.

feminism...a feminism that recognises multiple genders, that contributes to the collapse of our current sex-gender systems, a feminism less concerned with the equality of men and women and more interested in the abolition of these terms as such...so gaga feminism will locate lady gaga as merely the most recent marker of the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, sexuality, and as a channel for potent new forms of relation intimacy technology and embodiment...gaga feminism, after all, wants to incite people to go gaga, to give up on the tried and the true, the real and the authentic, the proven and the tested, and instead encourages a move toward the insane the preposterous the intellectually loony and giddy, hallucinatory visions of alternative futures.”<sup>168</sup>

This is, in fact, a feminism that readily chimes with my own creative objectives, as well as the objects of study that I find most powerful. Regardless of the term’s footing within universal discourse, my dissertation is, to a significant degree, a “Gaga Feminist” project. Halberstam also locates the power to manipulate various facets of our identities culturally accepted as “givens,” through performance. They explain by saying, “Lady Gaga [becomes] the vehicle for performing the very particular arrangement of bodies, genders, desires, communication, race, affect, and flow.”<sup>169</sup> Halberstam deals with Gaga as the imitable representative that both announces the desire to undo cultural norms, and sanctifies subversive performances in everyday life. This brings me to quickly note the idea of the Carnavalesque. Halberstam deals with Gaga as a sort of beacon of radicality through which people might find their escape from normality. In a way, this reflects the idea of the carnivalesque as being a momentary relief, which is enjoyed, and resets our abilities to carry on the patterns of our responsibilities and roles. I want to be clear that I see subversive representations of gender within the popular cultural landscape as having contextual effects depending on the audience. What is subversive to a small town in Iowa, may not seem subversive at all to a queer audience of drag queens in New York City. Despite discrepant effects, I have chosen my objects of study not based on any impossible universal reception of

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., xii.

any audience, but on the intentions of the performer—where they clearly deviate from norms, and, in the cases of most of the performers I observe, continue to exist, dress, perform, and think, in ways that refuse those images and lifestyles from which the carnivalesque offers only temporary respite.

Though less applicable to my work, *Gaga Feminism* also draws the issues of gender and equality sensationalised by pop performance to finer points, dealing with issues of family, and intimacy. Halberstam navigates issues normativity and queer family structure, and the fluidity of desire within queer sexualities. A section is dedicated to homonormativity, and same sex marriage rights, which they critique as a weak, reactive politics that maintains a status quo. Rather, Halberstam suggests that rights should not be marriage-dependent, and that alternative intimacies are not served by the marriage model.<sup>170</sup>

Ultimately, *Gaga Feminism* is about overlap between queer and popular culture, and how these issues get distilled down to a domestic and relatable cultural level. It uses Gaga as a direct conduit to feminist theory, establishing her as an icon of sexual agency, confrontation, and progress, whose effects can be felt at common levels.

Gaga experiments with various incarnations of the self, ultimately showing just how mutable, and arbitrary a singular, definable “self” is, whether, male, female, or even human. While establishing the unfixed nature of gender and sexuality is paramount to Gaga’s mission and performance, we might compare this to how other artists assert that is their queer identity which must be considered fixed.

Peaches and The Gossip rose to prominence around the same time as Lady Gaga in 2008, but may be considered as having developed through earlier queer musical movements such as Riot Grrrl and Queer/Homocore. After building careers on independent labels such as Kill Rock Stars, K Records, and Mr. Lady—labels which have a history of supporting queer artists—several artists and groups who are gay or have gay members were signed to major

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.,104.

labels in the early 2000s. These artists included Peaches, The Gossip, Le Tigre, Tegan and Sara, and The Scissor Sisters. Peaches' *Talk to Me* video (2009) shows the singer in a leotard desperately begging and shouting at the camera, as she moves through an empty, dark, and eerie house, uncovering women in underwear with massive tangled wigs [Figure 14].



Figure 14: Peaches, *Talk to Me*, 2009

Piles of hair slowly take over whole sections of the house before Peaches is joined by all of her discovered women, sexually entangling herself in their bodies and wigs. Feminist author Germain Greer explains:

“In the popular imagination, hairiness is like furriness, an index of bestiality, and as such an indication of aggressive sexuality. Men cultivate it, just as they are encouraged to develop competitive and aggressive instincts, women suppress it, just as they suppress all the aspects of their vigour and libido.”<sup>171</sup>

In Greer's context, Peaches can be seen as asserting her lesbian sexuality, vigour, and libido through the wild and abundant hair imagery.

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<sup>171</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin Books, 1971), 38.

The Gossip's video, *Move in the Right Direction* (2012) shows lesbian drummer, Hannah Blilie enter the frame in a leather jacket, jeans, boots, and a buzz cut hair style, before taking her place at the drums to begin the song. I would like to explore Blilie's identity in dialogue with another of Halberstam's texts, *Female Masculinity* (1998), which further contextualises the fluid nature of masculinity and femininity between genders. Halberstam begins with a discussion of the formation of female identity. She explores how being a "tomboy" is accepted to a point, and then as soon as puberty begins, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl—onto all girls, not just tomboys.<sup>172</sup> Halberstam frames the pressure of being boxed in, in a way that foreshadows acts of extremity in representation—as if literally exploding out of these historical confines. Halberstam claims that, rather than impersonation of maleness, female masculinity exposes yet another "performance" of gender, but in the following passage, questions why it is not accepted in the same way as it has been when performed by men:

“female-born people have been making convincing and powerful assaults on the coherence of male masculinity for well over 100 years; what prevents these assaults from taking hold and accomplishing the diminution of the bonds between masculinity and men?”<sup>173</sup>

Blilie's butch appearance can be counted as one of the assaults referenced by Halberstam—as a subversion of both the male and female gender—exposing masculinity as a performance, equally as applicable to the female sex. Despite referencing a history of masculine women, Halberstam explains that, “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing.”<sup>174</sup> To be a “real thing” this would mean stemming from the male gender, whose performance of masculinity has been naturalised.

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<sup>172</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

The discontinuity between sexed men and masculinity, and sexed women and femininity is not only combatted by female masculinity, such as Blilie's expression thereof, but in queer male artists' work who identify with, and represent themselves with feminine aesthetics, such as Jeffree Starr. Halberstam also combats the tenuous link between masculinity and patriarchy in the following passage:

“Within a lesbian context female masculinity has been situated as the place where patriarchy goes to work on the female psyche and reproduces misogyny within femaleness.”<sup>175</sup>

I agree with Halberstam's assertions that masculinity must be accepted as fluid between genders, making it equally accessible in a lesbian context without being anchored to misogyny and patriarchy. Later, this will be explored in several examples of queer male performers' videos, further destabilizing these lines between interior and exterior expressions of sexuality. Despite the tenuous alignment of masculinity to misogyny and patriarchy—a relationship sadly rampant in many popular music videos—it is again simply dependent on the performance to dictate what these aesthetics can mean. Just as femininity has been adapted into powerful symbols of sex, self-possession, and independence by the outrageous acts and opinions of Madonna, Beyoncé, and RuPaul, the queer appropriation of masculinity bares investigation to separate it from historically negative connotations created by acts of sexism documented in popular media, and in our culture.

In contrast to Blilie's 'female masculinity,' lead singer, Beth Ditto, a femme lesbian, is shown in heavy makeup and feminine dress. The collision of identities here is notable for its discrepant display of both masculinity and femininity by two women of the same sexuality. The video's entourage of male dancers further destabilise the connection of masculinity to maleness. The dancers seem to represent the gay stereotype of a “twink,” a younger, slender homosexual boy. The unmasculine boys do classic voguing moves—a dance style closely aligned with New York's gay dance scene in the 1980s—and are dressed in futuristic, effeminate spandex body suits, with leather epaulettes.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 6.

Another destabilisation of the sex/gender tie is seen through the work of Jeffree Starr. Starr was also signed to a major label after gaining popularity on the internet platform, Myspace.com. Starr is a gay male, who exclusively dresses in ultra-feminine drag. Of drag performance, Butler has said, “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”<sup>176</sup> Starr’s videos *Beauty Killer* (2010), and *Prom Night* (2012) are dominated by a pink palette of clothes, hair and makeup, and showcase Starr’s myriad performances of femininity which reflect the subversive elements noted by Butler. This is compounded by Starr’s masculine voice, which creates further dissonance between sound and image, unhinging male voice, and the body it signifies from masculine aesthetics.

Unlike the artists above, female performers such as Grimes and Paramore opt for a less glamorous aesthetic that shifts focus from their sex appeal as a selling point, or even part of their identity. In her video, *Oblivion* (2012) Grimes attacks hetero-male norms by both refusing standards of sexualised femininity, and inserting herself in stereotypically hetero-male environments whose constructed performance is effectively highlighted by the already established performance context of the video. In the video, Grimes wears casual, punk-y clothes and her hair is dyed multiple colors. She is filmed singing the track in stadiums during an American football match, and a motor-cross racing event. The cutaway shots to over-zealous fans watching the violent sports show that Grimes is a minority in the hyper-masculine environment to which she appears utterly indifferent. Her high, rhythmic soprano vocal conjures further associations of femininity—yet another penetration of the traditionally masculine space depicted in the video. Perhaps the most interesting critique in the video comes through scenes of the men’s locker room, where shirtless men covered only by white towels are shown lifting weights and examining themselves in slow motion [Figure 15]. Several mirrors are included in the shot, and flashes of light go off as if referencing the a camera’s flash, and the body cultivated to pose for it. Grimes exposes the privatisation of male vanity—a trait more closely aligned with femininity and women. At the end of the

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<sup>176</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174.

video, Grimes is shown in a living room where shirtless men slam dance to her track. She adopts a stylised, though still unsexualised feminine appearance. She wears a high-collared dress, which covers her arms, and is cut just above her knees. Her hair has been groomed out of its earlier depicted frizzy and moppish state, and she wears noticeable, if not heavy, makeup. Her presence is yet another subversion of the female role—defying its limits associated with the feminine dress she adopts.



Figure 15: Grimes, *Oblivion*, 2012

Pop-punk band, Paramore is another female-fronted act who generally eschews overt representations of sexuality. Paramore’s videos often focus on live performance such as *Careful* (2010) or *Ignorance* (2009), showing lead singer Hayley Williams’, energetic and highly physical delivery. She is portrayed, not as masculine, but as boyish, or a “tom boy.” Williams has adopted a progressively more feminine appearance since the band’s debut in 2007, though her performances and costuming in video have continued to avoid expressing sexual agency or desire.

The comparison of videos by the highly sexualised and feminine, Lady Gaga, and Peaches to Grimes and Paramore brings up issues about how visible bodies and sexualisation can be



read as either objectification, or sexual agency. Radical feminist, Andrea Dworkin defines objectification in the following passage:

“Objectification occurs when a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, bought and sold. When objectification occurs, a person is depersonalised, so that no individuality or integrity is available socially or in what is an extremely circumscribed privacy.”<sup>177</sup>

A generalised second-wave feminist reading of videos such as those by Gaga or Peaches would likely build off of Dworkin’s definition to posit them as playing into patriarchal desire, and commodifying sex in the same fell swoop as negating their interior value. I argue that while these artists have essentially made objects and, for that matter, brands of themselves (“Peaches” and “Gaga” being a bit more marketable sounding names perhaps, than Merrill Beth Nisker and Stefanie Germanotta, respectively), they have not made themselves “less human” as Dworkin suggests, but Super Human. When they yell into the camera, and flaunt their bodies and sexuality, they do so with a conviction that renders them invincible. Marsha Meskimmon further supports how these images differ from regressive sexual representations in the following passage:

“Rendering female sexual agency visible treads a dangerous path between an empowering investigation of desiring subjectivity and the objectification of “woman” as no more than a sexual body...desire beyond the socially imposed limits of banal housewifery and sanitised prostitution can act against these restraints.”<sup>178</sup>

Lady Gaga and Peaches are anything but representative of the banal housewife, or any antiquated female archetype. Railton and Watson make an assertion I agree with that ties

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<sup>177</sup> Andrea Dworkin, “Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality,” in *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 30.

<sup>178</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, “Conceptual Cartographies,” in *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 332.

sexualised images to the attitude of second-wave feminism by saying, “[Postfeminism] is a coming together of traditional feminist values with a historically and materially different experience of being young and female.”<sup>179</sup> The women discussed above are the beneficiaries of second-wave feminism, whose greater rights and sense of entitlement has manifested in provocative and overt sexualisations of their bodies, or direct confrontation with male dominance as performance. Railton and Watson further echo the strength of these Postfeminist representations by saying, “images of strong, sexually liberated, and economically independent women... trades on the idea that contemporary women can be both powerful and feminine at the same time.”<sup>180</sup> I am inclined to dismiss charges of objectification in videos such as these, where the subversion of normative roles is pronounced alongside sexual agency. I argue that sex is powerful, and that both sexual agency and sexuality have been so grossly, historically policed, that any provocative reiteration of a sexual self-possession is not only positive, but symbolically necessary to culture which is still flawed and dominated by hetero-sexist representations and norms. Grimes highlights the fact that sexual agency is not the only means at an artist’s disposal for addressing issues of sexism, but perhaps the additional interplay of sexuality and sexual agency makes Lady Gaga’s, and Peaches’ work more complex, and socially combative for adding yet another layer to the equation of gender.

### Homo Femininity

I turn now to consider the category of Homo-Femininity. This section observes works by artists who seem to privilege their identity as gay men over a feminist or female self-identification. Adam Lambert is an openly gay artist who came to prominence on the television program, *American Idol*, as the runner up in the show’s eighth season. He was then signed to major label, RCA Records. The subversion of Lambert’s videos is based around his image as a gay icon. In videos such as *For Your Entertainment* (2009) and *If I had You* (2010) Lambert appears in flamboyant dress, often with painted nails, heavy makeup, jewelry, and

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<sup>179</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 26.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

effeminate hairstyling. Never crossing over into drag, however, Lambert exudes male femininity.

Lambert's flamboyant glamour can be contrasted in videos by Michael Hadreas, who performs under the name, Perfume Genius. The subversive elements in Hadreas' videos hit hard, carrying a sense of tragedy and frailty. This is complimented by the melancholy sounds, and slow pace of the tracks. *Hood* (2012) features gay porn star, Arpad Miklos, who fit Hadreas' desired description of someone, "big, masculine, and tender."<sup>181</sup> Miklos is in fact, burly, with a hairy chest, shaved head, and rippling muscles. Hadreas begins the song singing from Miklos' arms, in which he is cradled like an infant in a homoerotic Pietà. Miklos stares dotingly at Hadreas, who wears diamond cross-shaped earrings, and a white mesh tank top, seemingly coupling gayness and purity. Miklos proceeds to slowly comb Hadreas' hair, and apply makeup to his face. His hyper-masculine appearance, and the hyper-sexual career for which he is known are subverted through incredibly tender and intimate acts of care. The couple then assumes various costumed poses while they stand for portraits indicated by the light from a camera's flash [Figure 16]. Hadreas elaborated on the video by saying:

“[Its] about how if someone knew you 100%, they would go away...So, in the video, I didn't acknowledge him until I was fully done-up in all my gear and my wig. That's how I feel in general. That freaky shit underneath—that's kind of who I am, really.”<sup>182</sup>

The struggle with identity that Hadreas expresses is not one of not knowing who he is, but of knowing, and fearing that he will not be accepted by a partner for it—for in fact, being too subversive. He represents this in an inverse way in the video by making his costumed, odd-looking self the one that he wishes to be seen.

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<sup>181</sup> Ryan Dombal, "Video: Perfume Genius *Hood*," *Pitchfork*, January 18, 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/news/45133-video-perfume-genius-hood/>

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.



Figure 16: Perfume Genius, *Hood*, 2012

Another of Hadreas' videos, *Take Me Home* (2012) incorporates the same half-hearted, budget drag seen in *Hood* (2012), though its darkness is enhanced by the isolation of Hadreas' character. The video opens with Hadreas laying in the street. He stands when a car rolls up to him, with its lights shining on his body. When he rises, we see Hadreas in hot pink high heels, stockings, a sports jersey with a large number 4 inscribed with the word "Play" (abbreviating "foreplay") in smaller lettering worn like a dress on his petite frame, a high school letterman-style sports jacket, and gold rings. Hadreas is followed by the car, as we are given the driver's view of him strutting slowly down the road. He then strikes fashion poses against a wall, spliced with shots from the industrial part of his hometown of Seattle. One shot focuses on Hadreas' knuckles displayed to the camera as a symbol of grit and self-protection (still decorated with feminine jeweled rings, and painted nails), followed by a close-up of his arms crossed over his chest as he sways in a contrasting moment of tender, feminine, self-care. We see Hadreas enter a convenience store, and emerge eating a Twinkie, referencing his gay identity as a "twink." Hadreas said of the video:

“*Take Me Home* carries a very desperate feeling. I'm walking around in a very hooker-y way. Truckers were whistling at me, which was both awesome and nerve-racking. There's a part of me that didn't really care, and there's another part of me that desperately hoped I was pulling it off.”<sup>183</sup>

In the video, part of the desperation, which Hadreas notes above, and what I identify as subversive to the policing of gendered norms, comes from the commitment to portray this highly feminised, gay, boy despite the clear destitution of his situation. This is compounded by Hadreas' quote, as he reveals his desire to satisfy the presumably hetero-male gaze of the truckers who witnessed his video shoot. These videos strike an emotional chord absent from Lambert's triumphant parade of flamboyant self-confidence. Though the relationship between Hadreas' alignment of femininity, or perhaps more specifically homosexual femininity with weakness and frailty is a tenuous one, the characters read more clearly as survivors rather than victims, and present a more confessional sense of asserting one's gender and sexuality in a world dominated by hetero-sexist representation.

### Homo Masculinity

This section focuses on videos by gay male artists who appropriate the hyper-masculine aesthetics historically aligned with heterosexual, often homophobic, cisgender male culture. These works subvert and contest the historical stereotype of gay men as effeminate and weak. However, in combatting this norm drawn from the alignment of homosexual men and heterosexual women for their shared desire of sexed-males, these images also contest the norm that heterosexual women *should* be effeminate, and are weak. In these works, images of thugs, athletes, cowboys, and other masculine stereotypes dominate, despite lyrical content, or video narrative, which pronounces the artists' homosexuality.

Until 2016, Frank Ocean was a notable exception in this category, as a cisgender, queer male artist, who avoided queer imagery in his work. In a confessional narrative posted to social

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<sup>183</sup>Larry Fitzmaurice, "Watch Perfume Genius' Dark, Powerful Video for 'Take Me Home,'" *Pitchfork*, October 5, 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/news/48107-watch-perfume-genius-dark-powerful-video-for-take-me-home/>.

media site, Tumblr in 2012, Ocean detailed his unrequited love and desire for a male friend. This preceded the release of his album, *Channel Orange* (2012), where Ocean references his romantic interests with masculine pronouns. In "Thinkin Bout You" (2012), he croons, "My eyes don't shed tears, but boy they pour when I'm thinkin' 'bout you,"<sup>184</sup> and in the confessional, "Bad Religion" (2012), he laments, "This unrequited love/To me it's nothing but a one-man cult and cyanide in a Styrofoam cup/I could never make him love me."<sup>185</sup> Unlike Adam Lambert or Jeffree Star, Ocean revealed his sexuality only after signing with a major label, and having an established fanbase with rap collective, Odd Future. This is to say: he was not an artist consciously signed, and marketed with the interest of selling to an LGBTQ fanbase. Rather, his public outing subverted the image Odd Future had constructed of the boyish and vaguely violent,<sup>186</sup> if still artistic, indie, skateboarding rappers from Los Angeles. As the first, and presently only mainstream rapper to be out as queer, Ocean's importance to defying the homophobic norms associated with rap culture can not be overstated. I have specified that homophobia is widely "associated" with rap culture, for as queer rapper, Mykki Blanco has stated, "let's not be racist and target hip-hop! Why is the music business in general so homophobic?"<sup>187</sup> Blanco makes a strong point supported by the lack of queer artists in mainstream music. Though perhaps is it encouraging to note emerging rap artists such as Young Thug, who seem to be of a generation whose relationship to gender norms has shifted. Young Thug maintains a fluid gender style, sometimes wearing feminine clothes, such as the Alessandro Trincone couture dress worn on the cover of his album, *Jeffery* (2016) [Figure 17]. Young Thug has also stated, "You could be a gangster with a

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<sup>184</sup> Frank Ocean. "Thinkin' 'Bout You," *Channel Orange*, Def Jam Recordings, Musical Recording, 2012.

<sup>185</sup> Frank Ocean. "Bad Religion," *Channel Orange*, Def Jam Recordings, Musical Recording, 2012.

<sup>186</sup> Hermione Hoby, "Rappers and Rape: The Incredible Sound and Hateful Lyrics of Odd Future," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/may/08/odd-future-tyler-creator-rape>

<sup>187</sup> Dorian Lynskey, "Mykki Blanco: 'I didn't Want to be a Rapper. I Wanted to be Yoko Ono,'" *The Guardian*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/sep/15/mykki-blanco-i-didnt-want-to-be-a-rapper-i-wanted-to-be-yoko-ono>

dress or you could be a gangster with baggy pants. I feel like there's no such thing as gender."<sup>188</sup>



Figure 17: Young Thug, *Jeffery* Album Cover, 2016

He makes no clarification if someone might uphold the status of "gangster" regardless of sexuality rather than dress, though if Young Thug believes that gender does not exist, then presumably sexuality stands to be unhinged from the gender norms which have historically policed it. Rap and hip hop have also seen a plethora of emerging queer artists changing the scope of the genres: Zebra Katz, TheeSatisfaction, Big Freedia, Brooke Candy, Angel Haze, PsychoEgyptian, Lelf, Cakes da Killa, and Blanco themselves. However, as Carrie Battan points out, the support for these rappers may only be part of a specific enclave whose perspective may not be shared by mainstream audiences:

"acceptance for queer figures in rap outside of a New York underground bubble are still flimsy at best. When it comes to a culture that caters almost exclusively to heteronormative sensibilities, it's easy to applaud topical gestures of gay acceptance

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<sup>188</sup> Sheldon Pearce, "Young Thug: Jeffery," *Pitchfork*, September 1, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22329-jeffery/>

without demanding to see them applied on a tangible, more mainstream level, be it in the form of live bills shared between gay and straight rappers, co-signs, radio play, or label deals."<sup>189</sup>

Above, Battan makes the point that mainstream rap has yet to put its supposed acceptance into more visual practice, and to incorporate queer acts more significantly into its economy. She also notes the persistence of a homophobic mentality among top rap acts, such as A\$AP Rocky, who, despite claiming acceptance, structures it around precariously worded caveats: "Man, if you're gay we can be friends... as long as you're a great person and, y'know, you don't bother me and make me uncomfortable, then let's be friends, dude."<sup>190</sup> In light of such quotes, Battan concludes:

For most heterosexual rappers, treatment of gays seems to go something like this: Cherry-pick gay culture for things you can use to enhance your own brand, fly your fashionable freak flag high, grandstand your anti-homophobic statements, if the spirit moves you, and wait for the applause (it will come). But make sure to keep the gay men at a fearful arm's length at all times.<sup>191</sup>

Battan's suggestion that rappers flirt with queerness to the edge of its marketing potential, and reserve collaboration and business for their "safe" hetero counterparts is what makes Frank Ocean's latest video work a significant step toward queering mainstream rap.

Though gender subversion was not thematically prevalent in the images of Ocean's videos for songs from *Channel Orange* (2012), the *Nikes* (2016) video—the first released in promotion of the album, *Blond* (2016)—experiments with the queer representation of subjects in the video, and Ocean's own queer identity.

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<sup>189</sup> Carrie Battan, "We Invented Swag: NYC's Queer Rap," *Pitchfork*, March 21, 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/article/8793-we-invented-swag/>

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.



The video opens with a shot of Ocean alone on stage. Lit by bright white lights from several angles, this first image of Ocean presents him as both ethereal and exposed. His face is covered in glitter, and his white ensemble is feminised with heavy pearl embellishment [Figure 18]. Ocean's angelic appearance is both highlighted and juxtaposed by a devil character that appears later in the video, dancing in the upper balcony of the theatre. The pairing reflects much of the video's concern with dueling sides, or versions of the self.



Figure 18: Frank Ocean, *Nikes*, 2016

What follows is a series of low quality screen tests that show alternative-looking young people, perhaps auditioning for the video as later scenes suggest. The images' unproduced, unpretentious qualities allow tattooed and pierced bodies to appear effortlessly natural. Their subtle queerness is expressed by a gentle refusal to produce gendered aesthetics, and presumably their behavioral norms, or to exert similar energies on the cultivation of an appearance which directly contests them. These figures appear later at a party, which is revealed to be staged. At various points in the video, elements of the production itself—cameras, lighting rigs, clapperboards, footage from dress rehearsal—are exposed, maintaining an awareness to the Ocean's lack of boundaries between personal and performative space, as well as the construction of performance and identity in both realms.

Following footage of the screen tests, Ocean is shown sitting outside in the dirt, leaning against the back of a numbered and branded race car. His casual, masculine dress of jeans,

Nike trainers, and a heavy, army green coat, and the rugged environment around him contrasts the softer image of Ocean previously shown in established artistic space. However, the masculinity of the image is also subverted by his dramatic eye makeup, which suggests he is of the same alternative enclave as the group pictured in the screen tests. He drinks from a disposable cup, then stumbles, presumably from inebriation. As if an effect of the alcohol, the song's vocal is slowed to the point of distortion. He repeats, "I've got two versions," again reinforcing the sense of a split self he has introduced by pairing angelic and satanic images, and exploring a sense of his on and off stage self. Two statues of the Virgin Mary are shown in the back seat of a moving car, suggesting we are meant to hear, "I've got two virgins," in Ocean's looped, effected vocal. Two young, Asian women, wearing stereotypically fetishised school uniforms displace the statues. Are these the virgins he references? The continual reference to "two versions" proposes a dichotomy between Ocean's personas, which is further highlighted by the interplay of images such as these "two versions" of virgins. On stage, he appears glowing, safe and calm under theatre lights. Off stage we see him stumbling, drunk, somewhat desperate, perhaps seeking to reconcile his queerness with a masculinity historically aligned with male heterosexuality.

In the subsequent shots, Ocean's reality becomes distorted and pieced together as if recalling a dream, or perhaps constructing a queer fantasy. Perhaps these are the images Ocean sees when he closes his eyes on stage, while putting forth the persona of the seraphic star. The camera moves up the legs of a black body laid on a floor of dollar bills. The shot moves overhead at such a distance that the gender of the figure remains obscured. With this shot, Ocean plays with our established notions of desire. Is attraction to this svelte, oiled, erotic figure withheld until their gender is confirmed? The scene shifts with the addition of a second body. A black man's manicured red nails are shown caressing his chest, subverting masculine norms. His head rests on the belly of his female doppelganger. We are presented again with the concept of "two versions—one male, one female, with similar, and equally eroticised bodies. It remains unclear which figure we were first introduced to, but the image suggests gender as an irrelevant factor in producing desire.

Later scenes continue to conflate satanic and angelic imagery with sexuality and gender roles, consistently abiding by the video's sense of duality. A black male stripper is shown holding onto a pole in black angel wings. The figure may actually be Ocean. He wears the same heavy black eye makeup shown in the earlier outdoor scene. Perhaps this is his second, sexual, queer version of himself: a darker foil to the angelic version of Ocean first presented. The video concludes with Ocean setting himself on fire, as if suggesting he is in hell. The moral entanglements of gender and sexuality are further evoked when Ocean appears in a rare shirt designed by artist, Jenny Holzer for her Truisms series in 1987 [Figure 19]. Among the phrases printed on shirt are, "raise boys and girls the same way," "salvation can't be bought and sold," "nothing upsets the balance of good and evil," and "random mating is good for debunking sex myths."

These images do not the clarify the specific queerness of Ocean's sexuality. Rather, the video hints at his struggle to navigate the moral perceptions of sexuality between public and private life, or the absence of such boundaries at his level of visibility. Ocean has remained fairly ambiguous about his sexuality since his Tumblr post, despite drawing consistent media attention. *Nikes* seems to address a period of inner turmoil—a somewhat expected, or unsurprising subtext given Ocean's public scrutiny.

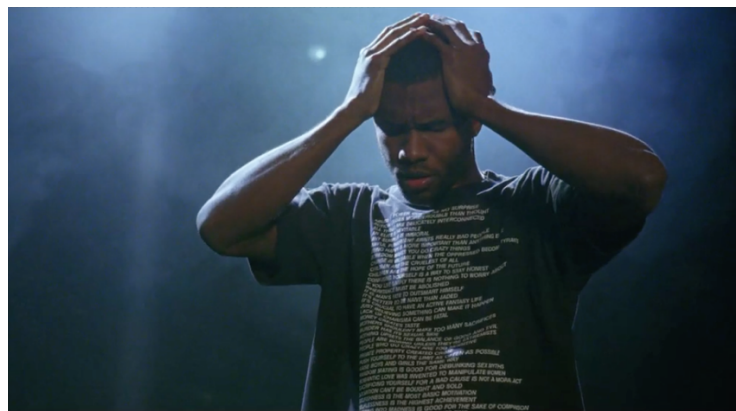


Figure 19: Frank Ocean, *Nikes*, 2016

In the less commercial rap world is Le1f, an artist on a subsidiary label of the independent, XL Recordings. Homosexuality and a masculine expression of homoerotic desire is Le1f's focus in much of his work, including in the video, *Soda* (2012). In the video, two men confront each other in a staredown wearing casual black outfits. One man's shirt is open, and the other's is made of diaphanous mesh, suggesting the sexual nature of their encounter. Two fake products—a large bottle of soda, and a tube of candy—are respectively marked, “Le1f” and “Boody” (the name of the track's co-producer). The two men combine the soda and candy, causing the soda to fizz. The effect is exaggerated in the video, as soda spouts and flows in slow motion over the two men's faces, who relish in the moment alluding to ejaculation with closed eyes and open mouths. The assertion here is that, when combined, Le1f and Boody will make you cum. Before proceeding, I will note that my reading of this work differs slightly from that of Stan Hawkins, who makes the following claim in his book, *Queerness in Pop Music* (2015):

"Le1f negates the concept of rap being straight and macho, challenging gender structures by destabilising norms and conventions...he denigrates the character and iconography of the tough, worked-out masculine rapper. In this way his brand of queer hop represents a significant initiative to contest the homophobic tendencies in hip hop...Hyperbolically the performance strips down the rigid structures of masculinity with the aid of exclusive haute couture"<sup>192</sup>

I agree with Hawkins that Le1f differs in appearance from certain stereotypes of "straight, macho, worked-out" rappers, perhaps alluding to artists such as Jay Z, Lil Wayne, or Eminem. However, I do not agree that Le1f's clothes obscure, or dismantle his masculinity, which Hawkins suggests. This simple difference in our observation of gendered aesthetics bares significant implications to the argument of this section. I view Le1f's use of masculine aesthetics in this work as an intentional play to unhinge masculinity from the heterosexual male figure to which it has historically been anchored, and from which it has been falsely thought to have been produced. It is precisely the unfixed nature of masculinity that I seek to

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<sup>192</sup> Stan Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 274-275.

establish in this reading of *Soda*. Le1f's high fashion costumes seem to draw inspiration from rap duo, Outkast's, Andre 3000, share a sartorial attention not unlike some of Kanye West's more elaborate tour ensembles designed by Maison Martin Margiela, and are considerably less flamboyant than the costumes of performers such as Gnarls Barkley singer, Ceelo Green [Figure 20, 21, 22, 23].<sup>193</sup> Though Hawkins might also interpret these artists' appearances as unmasculine, or threatening to masculinity, his lack of contextualisation of Le1f among these, or similar artists, suggests that Le1f's unmasculine appearance derives from his queer identity.



Figure 20: Andre 3000 of Outkast on *The Tonight Show*, 2002

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<sup>193</sup> I would like to note that these figures have not been dealt with in this text due to the comparable lack of subversive gender representations in their video work.



Figure 21: Le1f, *Soda*, 2012



Figure 22: Kanye West, Multiple costumes featured throughout the *Yeezus* Tour, 2013-14



Figure 23: Ceelo Green, Performance ensembles featured on *The Voice* (2011-13)

My assertion that Le1f's masculine appearance expresses the unfixed nature of masculinity might be further supported by an observation Hawkins fails to make. One of the dancers with whom Le1f is shown throughout the video is Juliana Huxtable, a transgender member of New York rap collective, House of Ladosha. Huxtable vogues in a high-fashion, structural ensemble, of iridescent bustier and skirt. Her placement is crucially made to highlight Le1f's comparable masculinity [Figure 24], despite the fact that Huxtable's trans identity and representation also further serves the overriding thesis that gender is neither fixed, nor inherently tied to a masculine or feminine aesthetic. I also agree with Hawkins that Le1f destabilises norms, and contests homophobia, though I see the homoerotic scenes of the video that follow as better examples to support such claims.



Figure 24: Le1f, *Soda*, 2012

Le1f re-visits the soda imagery in another shot where three figures stand over an effeminate, bearded man with long hair, pouring soda on him. As with the video's opening encounter between two men, this shot is again in slow motion, adding drama to the ritualistic scene. The shot references a “golden shower,” the act of urinating on a sexual partner. With the exception of Huxtable, whose dress is readably “femme,” Le1f and other characters are styled in avant-garde fashions that appropriate masculine garments. Le1f wears two pieces of an American football uniform—spandex pants padded at the knee and thigh, and a cropped sports shirt, which has been made of denim. Sex is the subtext of *Soda*, specifically gay sex and deviant sex acts, which Le1f manages to align with masculinity through costuming and juxtaposition with feminised queer counterparts.

Le1f uses the same tactic in the video *Hush Bb* (2013). In this work, he shares a moody and romantic room filled with candles, a vanity, blue roses, and a bed covered in dark satin sheets with a young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a leotard. The music echoes the intimacy and sensuality of the scene with slow beats and low bass notes. The camera subtly displaces the characters into the other's position throughout the video, highlighting a masculine/feminine exchange. They prepare themselves at the vanity, or grind and gyrate slowly over the satin sheets in the background. The sexualised actions are leveled as neither



specifically male or female, despite the clearly defined masculine and feminine aesthetics of Le1f, and his female counterpart, respectively. As in *Soda*, Le1f makes further reference to ejaculation and insemination. He pours honey into a cup, holding one receptacle high above the other to exaggerate the act. The woman repeats the motion when she is placed in Le1f's position at the vanity, again stamping sexual desire as independent of gender. Le1f reinforces his gay identity through his indifference to the girl's sexual, bodily display, yet his masculinity is highlighted in juxtaposition with her femininity.

Mykki Blanco is another gay, sexed male rapper whose inclusion in this category is somewhat tenuous. Blanco often dresses in women's clothing, without presenting like a woman. Blanco lets maleness and masculinity pervade intentionally, and in videos, is more tied to male masculinity than femininity. Before exploring Blanco's work, I must refute another alignment drawn by Hawkins, who claims:

"Within a changing landscape of greater social acceptance, especially in networking communications, the coming out of mainstream Black hip hop artists, such as Frank Ocean and Azealia Banks, has inspired a new generation of performers. Directly influenced by ball culture, this new wave of performers have acquired the label queer hop as a replacement of the older 'homo hop'. For the purpose of this part of my study, the focus falls on two New York artists, Mykki Blanco and Zebra Katz."<sup>194</sup>

Though I agree with the changing landscape of greater social acceptance as having contributed to the challenges posed to gender norms, I see little correlation amongst the artists he draws together. Hawkins views Blanco's open expressions of queerness as inspired by the more mainstream figure of Frank Ocean. This is a marginalisation of Blanco on several fronts. By the time Ocean released the letter online which delicately, if not ambiguously addressed his sexuality in 2012, Blanco was living as a transgender woman, was a published author, and emerging as a buzzworthy artist, touring with established,

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<sup>194</sup> Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, 266.

rap/noise act, Death Grips. Hawkins also maintains that Blanco's identity stems from ball culture, which Blanco directly refutes:

"I did not start in the drag community. Mykki Blanco began because I was actually, for the first time, having a bit of my own sexual revolution—I started cross-dressing and living a transgender lifestyle. Mykki Blanco came out of that, but it wasn't a lineage of drag performance."<sup>195</sup>

In addition to the above assertion that Blanco does not identify with the drag community, Blanco further distances herself from ball culture, and identifies the cultural movements with which they do identify by saying, "You can't tag me as the rapping transvestite. I never vogued in my life. I'm from a punk and Riot Grrrl background."<sup>196</sup> Hawkins aligns Blanco's success with Ocean's despite their highly discrepant musical styles, and the fact that Blanco was gaining notoriety even before Ocean publicly addressed his sexuality. Hawkins also wrongly asserts that Blanco was inspired by ball culture, whose foundations of drag and glamour starkly contrast the subcultural dogma of punk and Riot Grrrl, whose tenets are rooted in DIY politics and non-conformity. Hawkins does later mention Blanco's ties to the movement, but in the same passage as asserting that Blanco is inspired by mainstream artists:

"Blanco's identity is inspired by mainstream artists such as Rihanna, Lauryn Hill, and Lil' Kim, as well as the entire Queercore and Riot Grrrl movement. There are also overt references to the drag queen, Vaginal Davis, and the controversial Canadian director and writer, Bruce LaBruce."<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Bree Davies, "Mykki Blanco," *West Word*, January 21, 2015, <http://www.westword.com/music/mykki-blanco-you-will-have-your-breaking-points-but-you-must-persevere-6279290>

<sup>196</sup> Heidi Parker, "Mykki Blanco Talks Health Condition," *Daily Mail*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3124870/Mykki-Blanco-talks-health-condition-break-stigma-pride.html>

<sup>197</sup> Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music*, 266

In this, and the above section, Hawkins has conflated several artists and subcultures, only categorically unified as queer, black, and performative. Though this passage notes Blanco's interest in Riot Grrrl, which Blanco has directly affirmed, attributing influence to pop stars such as Rihanna contradicts Blanco's punk ethos. In several other interviews, Blanco has also said that they wanted to be 'the next Yoko Ono,'<sup>198</sup> reinforcing Blanco's desired identity as a performance artist, rather than one of the more commercial and glamorous figures which ball culture emulates, and that Rihanna simply *is*. And, while Blanco does share an aesthetic with Davis, Hawkins calls Davis a 'drag queen' without elaborating on the fact that Davis, like Blanco, critiques drag culture (and the culture it imitates) rather than participating in its conventional lineage. Reinforcing this interpretation of Davis' work, Jose Munoz has called Davis' performances "terrorist drag," "insofar as she is performing [America]'s internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality."<sup>199</sup> Because drag performance typically imitates established standards of beauty and femininity, Munoz's quote suggests the fear of those standards being appropriated and corrupted by a figure whose double minority status as black and queer confronts the racist, heterosexist infrastructure of those standards. Hawkins also draws no specific examples from LaBruce's oeuvre in order to affirm his connection to Blanco. In clarifying the subcultures and artists with whom Blanco most closely identifies, it is my intention to read accurate motives within the work.

In the video for "Wavvy" (2012), Blanco meets a drug dealer in downtown New York with a backwards sport cap, no shirt, and slim cut jeans. The jeans are a feminine pastel pink, but are filthy and ripped at the knee, signifying a masculine grit. Blanco's nails are painted, but chipped. Blanco raps half the song in masculine street attire before switching to a posh club scene, wearing a wig, bikini-style underwear, layered rhinestone belts, and heels.

Interestingly, Blanco leaves their chest bare, not attempting to hide their male physique. The party is filled with other guests in formal attire and men in full drag and makeup. The cutaway shots of Blanco in masculine dress, rapping in the back of a large truck highlight

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<sup>198</sup>Dorian Lynskey, *The Guardian*

<sup>199</sup>Jose Munoz, "The White to be Angry: Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," *Social Text* 53 (1997): 91

issues of class—that it is essentially safe to cross-dress amongst an upper-class, art party crowd, and not acceptable within lower class street culture. Railton and Watson explore this indirectly through the following passage on feminism:

“The commodification of feminism, its increasing collocation with capitalist practice, recasts the image of the modern feminist from a political identity into a consumer choice. Postfeminism becomes equated with, or worse reduced to, images of successful women.”<sup>200</sup>

Railton and Watson critique an image of a postfeminist where designer clothes, or other expensive goods express power and position, and are indicative of feminist approach, or that feminism has succeeded in opening male-dominated industries, where women might now compete. Railton and Watson suggest that feminism is essentially for sale: transformed from a belief and practice that combats exclusionary politics based on gender, into its own exclusionary politics based on class. Blanco’s relegation of his feminist persona to the upper-class milieu echoes this. This is also echoed by Blanco’s inclusion of an obese woman in her underwear at the party, who, like Blanco, does not meet conventional standards of feminine beauty, but who can express freedom of sex and sexuality in a world of pre-existing privilege.

In the video, *The Initiation* (2013) Blanco abandons feminine aesthetics entirely, with the exception of a shot of their painted nails in the opening. The video is in fact intensely violent, with a dark, masculine aesthetic. The music has qualities which we might also describe as suggestive of the historically masculine: low, dark, glitch beats, and Blanco rapping aggressively in low tones. Blanco wears black jeans, and a ripped black t-shirt; and crawls on all fours toward the camera. Video of Blanco's face has been superimposed onto their forehead, so that they retain eye contact with the camera while their actual, non-digitised face is lowered to the ground [Figure 25].

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<sup>200</sup> Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 22.



Figure 25: Mykki Blanco, *The Initiation*, 2013

Blanco arrives at a bunker after passing through an industrial, digitised landscape. After entering a room sectioned off with cage wire, they remove their shirt, and re-assume their position of all fours. Blanco is matched with another shirtless black, cisgender, male, who has the same facial animation on his head. The two brawl, and Blanco is shown bludgeoning the man while blood spouts for the camera. Blanco is paid for the victory, and throws cash upon the victim in an act of disrespect. Again, Blanco assumes maleness and masculinity in this lower class environment, which, given the attention to it in several videos, is also clearly essential to Blanco's personal identity. bell hooks examines the effect of images of specifically black, male violence such as Blanco's in the following passage:

“Within neo-colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the black male body continues to be perceived as an embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion. Psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of black male body as danger and the underlying eroticisation that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure. It has taken contemporary commodification of blackness to teach the world that this perceived threat, whether real or symbolic, can be diffused by a process of fetishisation that renders the black masculine ‘menace’ feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification.”<sup>201</sup>

<sup>201</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75.

bell hooks compares the objectified fetishisation of the threatening, or in this context, violent black male body to the historical objectification and sexualisation of women's bodies. hooks' perspective might suggest that Blanco's inclusion of violence is, in fact, a subversive reference to his feminine standing by way of this dramatised violence. Coming from an artist so aware of their gay/trans persona, the masculine violence—similar to what we observed earlier through Le1f's masculine aesthetics—subverts the perception of gay men as effeminate, and 'less than', while also tapping into the homoeroticism of sweating, aggressive, wrestling bodies. More ostensibly, the scene critiques of the conflation of conventional fraternity, and abject violence as sport. For those already familiar with Blanco's oeuvre, or those who pick up on the artist's painted nails as an establishment of their queer identity, the video's violence subverts the idea of gay men as weak. The video otherwise mocks the audience who misses these elements—a veritable parody of how hetero-males equate violence with "authentic" heterosexual manhood.

While Le1f and Blanco seem to draw on stereotypical masculine images of "jocks" and "thugs," respectively, gay, male, solo, electronic and pop artist, SSION appropriates the masculine figure of "Cowboy" in his video, *Earthquake* (2012). In this work, SSION exaggerates and glorifies his specifically gay masculinity, while directly attacking hetero-conventions, aesthetics, and roles as limited and boring. This is further confused, however, by his feminized, process vocal throughout, which hints at a similar sexual depravity of Madonna's whispered verses in "Justify My Love" and "Erotica." The video begins with a long shot of a house on an open plot of green land. Its classic suburban appearance is symbolic of both the typical American model of family and security, as well as the mass-produced uniformity of that model. A red pickup truck circles the house, and is shown driving directly over a rose bush. The camera pans up to show SSION singing into a red landline receiver from the truck, while giving a direct address to the camera. The pickup truck acts as a symbol of his masculinity, compounded by its crushing of another symbol of femininity and love. SSION also wears a masculine cowboy ensemble, subverted by his made-up face with lipstick and eyeshadow, painted nails, and rhinestone jewelry [Figure 26]. The image of him talking on the phone is shown streaming into the bedroom of a character

who we presume is speaking to SSION, as he is also shown holding a landline receiver in bed. The boy wears an outlandish outfit of a slightly acid house aesthetic, with checkered pants, and a black and white tube top over a long-sleeved yellow shirt. He is bald with a thin mustache that draws comparison to iconic gay filmmaker, John Waters [Figure 27].



Figure 26: SSION, *Earthquake*, 2012



Figure 27: SSION, *Earthquake*, 2012

This character plays the homoerotic object of SSION's desire throughout the video. His maudlin demeanor throughout the video symbolises the difficult navigation of boundaries imposed by conventional binaries and social structures, as he tries to unite with SSION. After his father is shown nodding off while watching television, the boy is driven by his mother

and her friend, who exemplify stereotypes of frumpy housewives, through a non-descript suburban neighborhood. He is dropped off at a school where mythical characters such as Cupid, Santa Claus, The Wicked Witch of the West, and the Easter Bunny are shown watching SSION videos, shaving in the bathroom, or mopping the floor, as if to assert that high schools, America, and the suburban ideological landscape at large are where social myths and stereotypes are housed, and likely created. The exaggeration of gender stereotypes in the video, suggests that such myth-making might extend to gender and sexuality as well. The boy enters two double doors with the word “Come” on the outside subversively referencing male ejaculation. He enters to find SSION performing in front of large letters that spell out “H-O-M-E.” This moment has a three-fold effect of pairing with the sign on the door to say “come home,” implying safety, and SSION’s invitation to the boy, and also referencing the words, Homme—“man” in French—and “Homo”—a reiteration of their sexuality. This video, like those above, makes violent attacks on hetero-masculinity, revealing how easily it is performed regardless of sexuality, and in fact that it is a crucial element to the identity of the above-mentioned artists’ sexual allure.

### Cyborg Feminism

This section explores videos whose post and non-human aesthetics strategically subvert masculine and feminine appearances and roles through a broader subversion of the human form. Unlike androgynous representations, which combine masculine and feminine traits, the figure in these works eschew the very human characteristics from which these categories are derived. Instead, they often adopt the appearance of animals, machines, or both. Even in the instances we will explore where gender is determinable, the focus is often still placed on cultivating an identity independent of the framework of sex—such as that of the Cyborg.

These images propose nuanced questions that differ in significant way from images that abide by human representation. Has contemporary technology served as a feminist tool? Are these posthuman representations a feminist subversion of gender categories, or does their abandonment of gendered aesthetics also sacrifice a position of commentary on gender? Do these elaborate biomorphic representations expose masculinity and femininity as fabrications



of comparable fantasy? We will also consider how a technological backlash may be responsible for the elaborate biomorphic representations of artists such as Bjork. Let us begin by unpacking some of the posthuman discourse that helps frame the view of these works.

In Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), she explains, "Although the 'posthuman' differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine."<sup>202</sup> What may once have been a fantasy of science-fiction, is now close to reality. In our Western Post-Internet era, we are often tethered, if not yet fully hardwired, to the clever mobile devices that relentlessly deliver us with texts, emails, reminders, news, photos, songs, and a plethora of other media and information. As the internet, and the technology required to access it have become fundamental to our contemporary mode of being, articulations of the cyborg have been explored to feminist effect in music video.

One of the ways in which this has been executed is through a glamourisation of technology, where artists embellish themselves with machine-like accessories, reinforcing an image of modernity and intelligence. Brooke Candy clads herself in gold metallic armor akin to that of the Star Wars android, C3PO, in her own video, *Das Me* (2012), and wears a silver version of the robotic suit as a character featured in Grimes' video, *Genesis* (2012). Similarly glamourised, is Lady Gaga's complete cyborg becoming in her video for *You and I* (2011). The video opens with a long shot of Gaga walking down a paved road in an elaborate ensemble of all black, with massive round metallic silver sunglasses, and a large, round hat with a black veil. Juxtaposed with the green fields flanking the pavement, Gaga is made to look intentionally "alien"—a fact later affirmed by the various incarnations her character takes throughout the video, including mermaid, and a winged creature. The camera moves briefly to a shot of her feet, which are bloodied and covered in dirt. As the character removes some debris from its heels, it is established as hard and perseverant for making its trek in spite of its wounds. This shot also reveals a bionic limb of Gaga's cyborg self. A montage ensues of her in various states of construction by a male counterpart, played by Gaga's

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<sup>202</sup>N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3

former partner, Taylor Kinney. The scene references Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, affirming that Gaga is a creation, rather than a natural being. A longer shot of the bionic Gaga reveals that the mechanism previously shown on her hand travels the full length of her arm, and around her neck and ear [Figure 28]. Wiring protrudes from her shoulder, denying the totality of her human, and thus female state. metal plate also appears to have been drilled into Gaga's chin, indicated by few drips of blood surrounding the area.

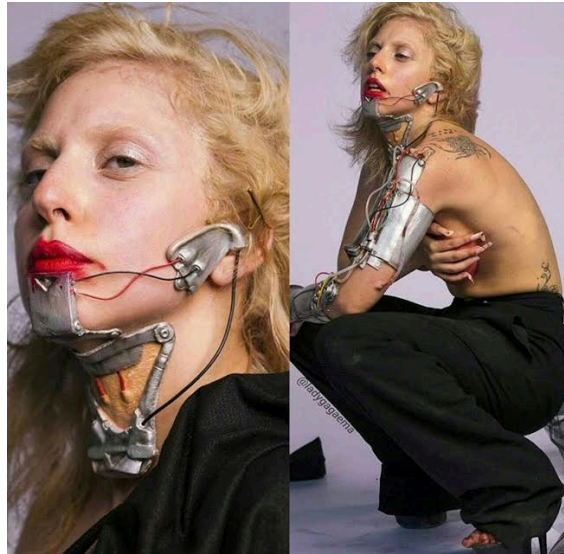


Figure 28: Detail of costume in Lady Gaga's *Yoü and I* video, 2011

This suggestion of enduring pain and violence reinforces the idea of her desensitised cyborg self, while subverting the classic feminine archetype as “weak.” Donna Haraway proposes the feminist value of Cyborg representation in the following passage:

“Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools...it means building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories.”<sup>203</sup>

Here, Haraway reiterates a break with the duality of gender, and a way to appropriate and re-inscribe the body through the cyborg, which Gaga exemplifies.

<sup>203</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 316.

Though technology's connotations of intelligence, ingenuity, and modernity are aspects of what reinforces the above mentioned artists' cyborg imagery as feminist, we might also consider how technology is being put in service of a contemporary glamour. Would the impressions of these artists be as powerful were they not as deathly confident in their sexual allure? The relationship between female sexuality, patriarchy, and capitalism will be explored throughout this text, ultimately locating sexual representation as a site of agency in the historical oppression of the female body. Carol Dyhouse explores this in direct relation to the historic idea of glamour in the following passage:

“Glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation. A desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration, a fiction of female becoming...A desire for glamour represented an audacious refusal to be imprisoned by norms of class and gender, or by expectations of conventional femininity; it was defiance rather than compliance, a boldness which might be seen as unfeminine. Glamour could be seen as both risk and self-assertion, or as a resource which might be used by women, albeit on what was often dangerous territory, in a persistently unequal society.”<sup>204</sup>

The glamorous iterations of the feminist cyborg fully reinforce Dyhouse's characterisation of glamour as progressive vehicle, and near-weapon in the social combat of gender politics. Artists such as Brooke Candy and Lady Gaga glamourise and mystify themselves through cyborg personas whose feminist impulse is tied to the intelligence and power deflected by their machine state.

However, these works also propose a question posed by Paula Rabinowitz: “In claiming space for the posthuman are we erasing yet again women's lives and stories?”<sup>205</sup> Rabinowitz suggests that perhaps the female body requires greater political visibility before it is obscured

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<sup>204</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: History, Women, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2010) 3.

<sup>205</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, “Soft Fictions and Intimate Documents: Can Feminism be Posthuman” *Posthuman Bodies*, edited by Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 98.

by the posthuman. In *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), edited by Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, Rabinowitz takes a different approach to defining the posthuman. She delineates from the cyborg model, looking at bodies outside normalizing borders:

“Poised between action and representation, posthuman bodies—voguing queens, PWAs—are bodies living outside the national, sexual, economic borders. They exceed and override borders by turning bodies into acts and actions into representations. Eliminating the distinction between action and articulation, deed and word, the posthuman body is still saturated with the stories of humanity that circulate around it; it speaks through a language straddling the borders between health/sickness, male,/female, real/imaginary.”<sup>206</sup>

Rabinowitz offers a definition of posthumanism more expressly reflective of a spectrum of marginalised *human* groups. She plays on the indeterminacy of borders—specifically bodily and sexual borders, and how these are constructed through “stories of humanity” and the “imaginary.”

I would like to consider how FKA twigs “speaks through a language straddling the borders” in her video *Glass and Patron* (2015). This work reimagines the biological production of posthuman subjects whose voguing, queer, and sexually indeterminate bodies perform the definitions proposed by Rabinowitz. Similarly indeterminate is the song’s structure and experimental barrage of dissonant electronics. The intensely dynamic track veers between ambient sounds, to rhythmic club beats. The video opens with a shot of a white van in a heavily wooded area. Inside the vehicle twigs begins the song while caressing her heavily pregnant body with long, metallic silver nails. Her portrait of herself as mother is coded as taboo by the secrecy suggested by her location—she has removed herself from society and driven into isolation. The image of the pregnant pop star would also seem subversive *to* the role of “pop star,” broadly speaking—an image also explored by Lady Gaga in her video for, “Born This Way” (2011). twigs pulls meters and meters of colorful silk from her body, which

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<sup>206</sup> Rabinowitz, “Soft Fictions,” 98.

subsequently birth feminised, adult male dancers, moving through the fabric. The dancers are coded as queer with their feminised and alternative hairstyles, and painted nails. One man wears braided pigtails, while another's blue hair has been gelled into Old Hollywood-style finger waves. Their movements are tender, relishing in the motion of the silk across their faces, and through their hands. They caress trees, conflating their natural surroundings with the assertions that they too are natural. Still set within the wooded area, twigs is then pictured center stage of a catwalk, where she begins to orchestrate a voguing competition—another queer, posthuman code noted by Rabinowitz [Figure 29]. The figures are intensely glamourised and confrontational—dressed in elaborate, colourful costume, they collectively defend the catwalk in a seated row, staring into the camera, and successively parading their skills.



Figure 29: FKA twigs, *Glass and Patron*, 2015

Though this video represents aspects of Rabinowitz's definition of the posthuman body, and how that body may speak in ways that redefine existing bodily narratives, *Posthuman Bodies* at times further defines the posthuman as accounting for the literal bodies that fall outside some socially determined mode of human fitness. They are failing, or they are changing (genders, for example), and they may not be accepted because of it. This is explored by Halberstam in the following passage:

“Queer, cyborg, metazoan, hybrid, PWA; bodies-without-organs, bodies-in-process, virtual bodies: in unvisualizable amniotic indeterminacy, and unfazed by the hype of their always premature and redundant annunciation, posthuman bodies thrive in the mutual deformations of totem and taxonomy.”<sup>207</sup>

I argue, however, that failure is precisely human: death, disease, vulnerability; as well as the host of emotions we feel through these experiences. Though the text draws potent insights into queer culture and queer bodies through the conduit of the posthuman topic, the relationship drawn from the posthuman term is largely forced. *Posthuman Bodies* also remains generally less relevant to my text’s focus on elements of futurity and fantasy found mirrored more significantly in the work of Hayles and Haraway.

The value of fantasies, such as the cyborg is echoed by Judith Butler in her essay, “The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess” Butler explores fantasy as a means of achieving a unrealised futurity:

“Fantasy has been crucial to the feminist task of (re)thinking futurity; to that end feminist theory relies on the capacity to postulate through fantasy a future that is not yet (Bartkowski, Haraway). In this capacity fantasy is not equated with what is not real, but what is not yet real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real.”<sup>208</sup>

I am interested in how the fantastical and unreal representations referenced by Butler, and employed in music video may relate to a future where we transcend masculine and feminine representation. This effect is further explored by Arthur Kroker in his book, *Body Drift*:

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<sup>207</sup> Halberstam et al, *Posthuman Bodies*, 19.

<sup>208</sup> Judith Butler, “Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 2. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 185.

“The very meaning, both surfaces and structure, of the body has begun to drift. Body Drift refers to the fact that we no longer inhabit a body in any meaningful sense of the term, but rather occupy a multiplicity of bodies—imaginary, sexualised, disciplined, gendered, laboring, technologically augmented.”<sup>209</sup>

Perhaps motivated by Butler’s idea of fantasy, the aesthetic range of these bodily augmentations noted by Kroker is evoked in the work in this section.

Anchored to these fantastical representations, however, are the inescapable implications and questions of a posthuman existence. As Rabinowitz asks: Do posthuman bodies have histories, genders, or sexualities?<sup>210</sup> While the fantastic fictions created in music video find a way out of the restrictive confines of gender, the mythic taxonomy of cyborgs and their stories also fold back on our own reality, exposing its similarly man-made origin.

Artists have also constructed their cyborg selves on an opposing end of the spectrum. Rather than embellishing themselves with glamorous technology in attempt become more machine-like, some videos portray artists as subsumed by technology itself, embedded in the digital design of the video. Scholars such as Robin Roberts would see this as sufficiently subversive in its own right. In her book, *Ladies First: Women in Music Video* (1996), Roberts asks, “How can the deconstructive possibilities of the postmodern art form be harnessed for the subversive agenda of a feminism committed to questioning the traditional limits of femininity.”<sup>211</sup> In response, she explores the denaturalisation of the female body through montage, rapid sequencing, and fragmentation as combatting beauty and passivity as naturally feminine. She also sees this as working toward a confrontation with the commercial commodification of women’s bodies in videos such as Pat Benatar’s *Sex as a Weapon*, where Benatar performs against a satirical background of dozens TV screens of leggy models.

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<sup>209</sup> Arthur Kroker, *Body Drift* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>210</sup> Rabinowitz, "Soft Fictions," 97.

<sup>211</sup> Roberts, *Ladies First*, xxv.

Though my research is concerned with performance as the means of subverting traditional agendas, I agree with her focus on the form as its own source of discourse. This manipulation and mastery of the virtual anatomy also echoes a tenant of Hayles' posthuman definition:

“The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born.”<sup>212</sup>

I propose that our manipulation of, and reliance upon technology has become, as Hayles suggests, a continuation of the prosthetic manipulation we first apply to our bodies. As Roberts' work shows, it can also be used to combat the limits of what those bodies signify.

The implications of such technological prosthesis is explored in Bjork's video for *Pagan Poetry* (2001). The video abstracts a sexual encounter; the intimate and kinetic is re-inscribed as mechanical and detached, though without compromise to aesthetic. The video proposes intimacy's invasion by, or perhaps assimilation with technology. Director Nick Knight gave [Björk] a Sony Mini DV camera and asked her to shoot her own private [sex scenes]. She asked [him] to make a film about her love life, so [he] gave it back to her and said, ‘Film your love life.’<sup>213</sup> In the video a posthuman veil is applied to the graphic (human) sexual encounter between Bjork, and her then-partner, artist, Matthew Barney. Our relationship to sexual norms is subverted through the intervention of technology. These scenes, which are abstracted through video effects that seem to solarise, and map the skin in a network of thin lines, can still be deciphered as documenting various states of penetration and emission [Figure 30]. And though we know from Knight's interview that it is a heterosexual encounter, it is leveled genderless through the technological abstraction.

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<sup>212</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

<sup>213</sup> “The Piercing Sound of Bjork,” *NME*, October 19, 2001, <http://www.nme.com/news/music/bjork-188-1375717>.



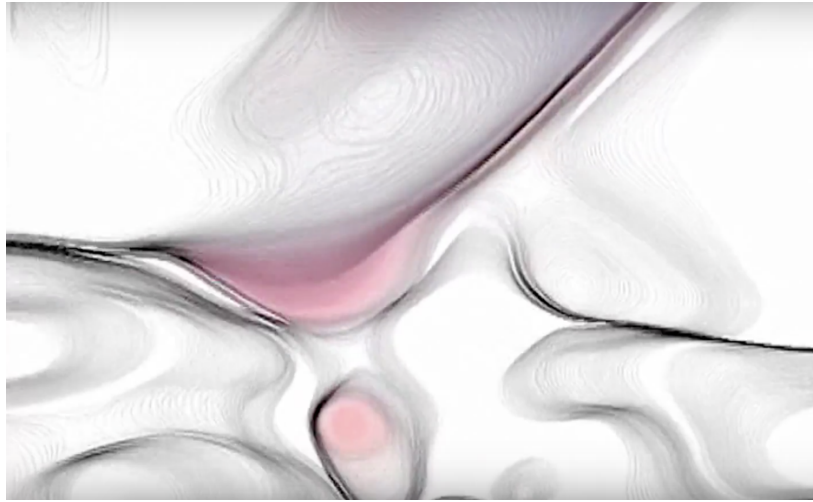


Figure 30: Bjork, *Pagan Poetry*, 2001.

In the video, Bjork's body is sexually penetrated by her lover, and later penetrated by herself in subversive acts of physical embellishment. She sews pearls onto her skin, and receives multiple piercings in her back, from which even more strands of pearls are suspended in a lattice. Though the initial scenes of computerised pornography are the kind of posthuman provocations informing this text, I am interested in the latter image as it relates to the following definition of the posthuman by Halberstam:

“The posthuman marks a solidarity between disenchanting liberal subjects and those who were always-already disenchanting, those who seek to betray identities that legitimise or de-legitimise them at too high a cost.”<sup>214</sup>

Halberstam suggests that one might *become* posthuman by betraying their legitimizing identities. Documented in the video, Bjork makes this kind of posthuman transformation visible. She betrays, or subvert classical expectations of femininity by fusing beauty with violence and pain. Further, it is revealed that these embellishments are part of a wedding costume. Bjork's upper body is exposed, with a minimal scattering of the pearl embellishments. Below her exposed breasts is a more elaborate white garment designed by

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<sup>214</sup> Jack Halberstam et al, *Posthuman Bodies* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 9.

Alexander McQueen—a designer known for unconventional constructions that question standards of beauty. The latter half of the video shows only Bjork giving a confrontational and emotive performance into the camera, where the vocals wail, then go acapella, declaring, “I love him” repeatedly. Bjork plays a sexual bride, subverting the most feminine of gender icons with through scenes that border on pornographic and masochistic. That border is constructed through the intervention of technology, changing our relationship to the intimate, erotic, and the painful.

To conclude, I would also like to consider how the nonhuman handling of gender may also be a reaction to the posthuman inclination toward the technological. Bjork’s *Unravel* (2003)<sup>215</sup> and *Oceania* (2004) are examples of the nonhuman that rely on fantasy, though separate from futurity. They further echo Artaud’s belief that we are sometimes compelled to return to nature:

“It is right that from time to time cataclysms occur which compel us to return to nature ie: to rediscover life. The old totemism of animals, stones, objects capable of discharging thunderbolts, costumes impregnated with bestial essences—everything, in short, that might determine, disclose, and direct secret forces of the universe”<sup>216</sup>

Artaud not only endows that natural with the potential to disclose forces of the universe, but sees a return to nature as a return to life that Bjork herself obscures through the digital landscape in *Pagan Poetry*. By comparison, *Unravel* and *Oceania* deal in aquatic, biomorphic aesthetics. In *Unravel*, tentacle-like, white strings appear wavering against an ambiguous black background. It is initially unclear whether they are in the depths of the sea or outer space. Fluttering electronic sounds, and rich and resonant cello chords are layered before Bjork’s tender vocal enters, lending the space a sense of romance and security. The camera follows the strings back to their source: a round, black formation similar to a sea

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<sup>215</sup> Although the track, “Unravel,” appears on Bjork’s 1997 album, *Homogenic*, the *Unravel* video was not released until 2003, in promotion of Bjork’s, *Greatest Hits* (2002) album, and tour.

<sup>216</sup> Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 10.

urchin, whose texture, however, is more like fur, or hair. At its center, are vaginal lips. The urchin is attached to the body of Bjork, who gently rocks with her legs tucked beneath her. She is costumed in a feminine, white, lace mini-dress, and directs the strings with her intricate hand gestures. It is difficult to say whether Bjork, or her seemingly symbiotic attachment, is the source of these appendages, or if we might say that she has been penetrated by them. On the other end of the tentacles is a faceless, computer animated sea form resembling jellyfish, squid, and cuddle fish. It dwarfs her form in size, and swirls in black aquatic space. With these fantastical images, Bjork threatens an abolition of masculine and feminine identities, while also revealing their construction.

*Oceania* moves Bjork's biomorphic persona to another, arguably even alien level, where she is all but unrecognizable as human. Her face has been covered in glimmering gems. The bottom half of her body is either absent, or obscured by her dark aquatic habitat. She emits jellyfish from her palms, which rise to a large network of orchid-like sea flowers

In *Unravel* and *Oceania*, Bjork is either augmented with symbiotic sea forms, or of decidedly inhuman origin and habitat. A human inclination that remains of these works, however, is one towards beauty and stylisation.

The works explored in this section make posthuman discourse visible. Some of these works pull our relationship to technology into view, and others seem to reject that relationship through an exploration of more natural aesthetics. The fantastical performances and personae addressed above expose the illusion of our gendered aesthetics, and inspire a means of their manipulation. Sex and reproduction are similar victims of this expository subversion. Biomorph, cyborg, or other such post and non-human representations seem to sacrifice a commentary on the status of individual genders, but do so by leveling the gender system against a futurity where we are not fixed to our human identities.

### The Soft Boys

The work discussed thus far has shown that female and queer artists may subvert the expectations of gender, and critique the gender binary by expressing gendered sexual

empowerment, cross dressing, or by adopting biomorphic or bionic costume, where gender is entirely obscured. There is an absence of this kind of subversion in videos by cisgender male artists, who likely seek to reflect the same hetero-masculinity of their target audiences. An exception to this is found in the video work of rock or goth bands such as HIM, My Chemical Romance, Mindless Self Indulgence, and Marilyn Manson. My Chemical Romance's *Helena* (2005) [Figure 31], HIM's *The Kiss of Dawn* (2007) [Figure 32], and Marilyn Manson's *Putting Holes in Happiness* (2007) [Figure 33] all showcase the bands' lead singers who share an aesthetic of long, black hair, heavy black eye makeup, and skin powdered pale white. They appear both effeminate and tragic, reflective of the emotional and melancholic nature of their songs, and genre.



Figure 31: Gerard Way of My Chemical Romance, *Helena*, (2005)



Figure 32: Ville Valo of HIM, *The Kiss of Dawn*, (2007)



Figure 33: Marilyn Manson, *Putting Holes in Happiness*, (2007)

However, these particular aesthetics, geared toward the feminisation, and dark glamourisation of cisgender men is representative of the wider goth-rock movement, rather than an attempt by any one of these artists to make independent comment on gender. Though Dunja Brill, author of *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality, and Style Dress, Body, Culture* (2008) explains that “the eccentric diversity and representation of gender within the Goth or Gothic subculture, is often described by its participants as open and liberating,”<sup>217</sup> these representations express a conformity to the expectation of the genre, rather than the diversity of gender representation she says is offered within it.

Outside the goth context, cisgender male artists seem willing to parody gender stereotypes, though unwilling to set new standards that refuse to abide by their gendered role. The Strokes video for *The End has No End* (2004) shows a young man in various scenes of his life from high school graduation, to his first day of work dressed in a typical business suit. His wife is shown kissing him goodbye, and then vacuuming the house. The repetitive nature of the editing serves to show the problematic stasis of this gender binary. The video considers the gender norms and limits which have also affected heterosexual men, expected to uphold masculine, patriarchal roles. This is echoed by Betty Freidan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): “Men weren't really the enemy, they were fellow victims, suffering from an

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<sup>217</sup> Dunja Brill, *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality, and Style Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2008)

outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill.”<sup>218</sup> Freidan not only suggests that cisgender men have yet to establish a modern expression of their maleness, but that conditions of modernity no longer allow them to meet the antiquated standards of masculinity to which they continue to hold themselves. Franz Ferdinand’s video, *Michael* (2004) begins with a performance by the band dressed in all black suits. Doppelgangers descend upon them while they play, essentially demonstrating the facility and ubiquity of the performance of masculinity [Figure 34]. All the men are identical replicas with blank faces. The robotic uniformity is emphasised when one of the men’s arm is pulled, and moves the video into a surreal section where parts of the band’s bodies double, and the room swirls around in what becomes a nightmarish mechanical montage that ends the video. These videos make fair attempts to comment on the limitations of existing structures, but make no attempt at solution, or alternative.



Figure 34: Franz Ferdinand, *Michael*, (2004)

It is of note that some cisgender female artists also adopt this kind of parodic strategy, as seen in Pink’s 2005 video, *Stupid Girls*, which shows women making desperate attempts to fulfill stereotypes of beauty or femininity. One woman chokes of the chemicals of her spray

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<sup>218</sup> Betty Freidman, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 372.

tan. When she exits the tanning booth she is an unnatural color of orange. Another scene shows Pink as a plastic surgery patient lying on a gurney with markings all over her body where she is to be operated on. Germaine Greer considers the kind of compulsive attempts toward perceived physical perfection dramatised in the video in the following passage:

“It is commonplace observation that women are forever trying to straighten their hair if it is curly and curl it if it is straight, bind their breasts if they are large and pad them if they are small, darken their hair if it is light and lighten it if it is dark. Not all these measures are dictated by the phantom of fashion. They all reflect dissatisfaction with the body as it is, and an insistent desire that it be otherwise, not natural but controlled, fabricated. Many of the devices adopted by women are not cosmetic or ornamental, but disguise of the actual, arising from fear and distaste.”<sup>219</sup>

Greer observes beauty less as an expression of vanity than an act toward control, stemming from fear. In contrast, Pink, like The Strokes, fails to offer solution or interpretation of the constructions of femininity she condemns, and further alienates her subjects as “stupid.”

#### Pussy Feminism

Pink’s video attempts a comical, less radical, ultimately less effective approach to feminist representation. Though it seeks to assert that women need not commodify femininity, and critiques the extreme, sometimes dangerous methods of doing so, its reproduction of toxic stereotypes fails to consider a source of this behavior. I have qualified several other videos that make fairly weak attempts at feminist positioning as representing “Pussy Feminism.” The use of the word “pussy” draws on the term’s history as a derogatory insult for weakness. Appropriated here in a feminist context, its embedded shock simply asks for More—more intensity, more power, more provocative alternatives. In 2007, for example, Fergie, of the band, Black Eyed Peas released a video for the song, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, which was the

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<sup>219</sup> Greer, *Female Eunuch*, 293.

fourth best selling single of the year.<sup>220</sup> Fergie serves as one example of the artists whose visual media fails to push the boundaries extended by their predecessors such as Madonna, Annie Lennox, or Alanis Morissette. Though the song's lyrical themes advise emotional strength with lines like, "I've got to get a move on with my life, its time to be a big girl now,"<sup>221</sup> the imagery of the video is as tame as one might expect from an artist who only hopes to aspire to be a "big girl." The imagery of the video implies female agency by showing Fergie leaving her lover, but not until she has assumed the victimhood of having heart broken by him. She spends most of the video vulnerably displayed in her underwear. The underwear's arguably childlike ruffled edges—a nod to the song's title, perhaps—starkly contrast the sexually provocative, and sophisticated couture designs worn by her pop counterparts, such as Beyoncé or Lady Gaga. In a study on the effects of music video on youth culture in 1987, Michael Brake observed:

“adolescent females receive distinct signals about the cult of femininity from popular fiction and mass media, and these cues have a central theme: romantic attachment and dependency on men.”<sup>222</sup>

As exemplified by Fergie, this trend for glamourised feminine imagery dripping with saccharine, yet relatable sentiment of heartbreak and loneliness continues, despite a revival of controversial media by pop music's female leaders.

The release of Katy Perry's video, *I Kissed a Girl* (2008) is another example. Scholar Jonathan Bollen explains:

“As the successes of lesbian and gay politics have pushed towards inclusion of homosexuality in the body politic, heterosexuals have come to defuse their highly

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<sup>220</sup> “Hot 100 Songs—Year End Charts,” *Billboard*, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2007/hot-100-songs>

<sup>221</sup> Fergie, “Big Girls Don't Cry,” *The Dutchess*, Interscope Records, 2006.

<sup>222</sup> Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 166.



charged erotic investment in homosexuality through constructing homosexual culture as fashionable, flirting with it, and making it their own.<sup>223</sup>

Perry's appropriation of homosexuality in the song and video stands as an example of the erotic investment, flirted with by heterosexuals. Perry makes her same-sex encounter a one-off novelty, and includes no imagery in the video which might contradict the notion of disposability she embeds with lyrics such as, "No, I don't even know your name, it doesn't matter. You're my experimental game, just human nature."<sup>224</sup> Beyoncé's *If I were a Boy* (2008) explores subversion in a similar fantasy-based mode. In this video, Beyoncé plays the role of a police officer. The role will later be adopted by a man to expose her fantasy of having the authority she perceives as specifically male. These videos express an interest in the destabilisation of gender roles and sexuality but frame those interests through fantasy, rendering them either seemingly disposable or implausible to their authors.

## Part II: Violent Femmes

Unlike the work in the category of "Pussy Feminists," the following videos have been given focus for their intense adherence to Artaud's performance theory that to shock and disturb is to progress. These female artists have been called "violent" as an allusion to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. These works explicitly confront existing social definitions of appropriate female appearance and behavior.

### Lady Gaga: Bionic Homoerotica

Though aspects of the theatrical strategies and feminist implications in Lady Gaga's work were discussed earlier in the text, I would like to return focus to the homoerotic identities proliferated in her video, *Alejandro* (2008), directed by fashion photographer, Steven Klein.

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<sup>223</sup> Jonathan Bollen, "Sexing the Dance at Sleaze Ball 1994," *Experimental Sound & Radio*, 40, no. 3 (1996): 187.

<sup>224</sup> Katy Perry. "I Kissed a Girl," *One of the Boys*, Capitol Recordings, Musical Recording, 2008.

Klein has said that the video explores, "The pain of living without your true love."<sup>225</sup> This theme is dramatised through the narrative of death and desire. Lady Gaga leads the funeral procession of her dead lover, then becomes a nun, signifying her commitment to a life of celibacy in their absence. Images of fire and violence run throughout the video, reinforcing the sense of profound loss. Lady Gaga represents herself as sexually unavailable, but includes a plethora of queer male icons, who seem to serve as the prostheses for her sexuality. Her homoerotic fantasies allow her to dramatise her desire outside a heteronormative framework. The individual figures also seem to express specific meanings, which further confuse historical boundaries of gender identity and sexuality.

The first shot of the video pans away from a man in a leather, police-style, biker cap, who sleeps slumped in a chair, with his legs crossed, wearing fishnet tights, and black stiletto heels. His chest is bare. In front of him is an AK-47 rifle, and an ashtray full of cigarettes [Figure 35].



Figure 35: Lady Gaga, *Alejandro*, 2010

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<sup>225</sup> James Montgomery, "Lady Gaga's 'Alejandro' Director Explains Video's Painful Meaning," *MTV*, June 9, 2010, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1641136/lady-gagas-alejandro-director-explains-videos-painful-meaning/>

As the camera pulls away we see he is in the company of several other men dressed in a similar sexual, biker uniform. There are several attacks on gender in just this opening shot. The characters in the video are modeled after police officers, or other militant figures. Rather than being at attention, expressing authority, responsibility, and control, they rest, even sleep, with their bodies languidly draped amongst club chairs, denouncing the expectations of their masculinity. The expected attitude of these gendered subjects has been corrupted by their poses, despite their being equipped with weapons. Their fishnets and heels marry a sexy and feminine drag aesthetic to that of the queer “daddy,” leatherman,” and “clone” stereotypes. While the characters are portrayed as lazy and unthreatening, it is implied that violence may be imminent. These characters simultaneously subvert classic hetero-male masculinity, while lending potentially violent authority to both the feminine drag character, and the queer stereotypes.

The next sequence shows a different group of similarly militant-looking men in a fashionable, minimalistic uniform. The characters arguably seem to reference the aesthetic of popular New York DJs, The Misshapes, who have been closely aligned with queer nightlife and high fashion [Figure 36]. The group members wear black shorts and boots, with their hair either cropped into a precision Vidal Sassoon-style bowl cut, or covered by ominous masks.



Figure 36: The Misshapes, 2008

The group marches down a ramp, eventually dispersing into the darkness, as the first shot of Lady Gaga is revealed. Her lips are an intense red, though the rest of her face is obscured by

an elaborate, bionic-looking headdress. The thick, glass lenses of the seemingly masculine, industrial-looking apparatus are covered by a feminine, black lace. Lady Gaga is shown leading a funeral procession dressed in a couture variation of a widow's ensemble [Figure 38]. The male characters' hypersexual representations are offset by suggestions that she may be asexual—either because she is in mourning, or part machine. She reinforces this by later costuming herself in a nun's habit made of oxblood PVC material. She lays in a bed of black satin sheets and pillows, surrounded by a pile of jeweled rosaries. Two months before the video was released, Lady Gaga told *The Daily Mail*:

“I’m single right now and I’ve chosen to be single because I don’t have the time to get to know anybody. So it’s OK not to have sex, it’s OK to get to know people. I’m celibate, celibacy’s fine.”<sup>226</sup>

This quote suggests that Lady Gaga represents her own sexuality through the nun character. She controls the male figures, drawing on them to express the erotic masculine desire that presently eludes her.



Figure 37: Lady Gaga, *Alejandro*, 2010

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<sup>226</sup> Benji Wilson, "Lady Gaga Gets Lippy," *The Daily Mail*, April 10, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-1264165/Lady-Gaga-gets-lippy-The-pop-star-teams-Mac-raise-Aids-awareness.html>

Gaga's control is reinforced by another homoerotic idol shown sitting on a bed surrounded by puppet-like strings, which perhaps she operates. He holds a gold gun as a kind of phallic symbol of his masculinity and virility. In the dance sequences that follow, she observes from a detached position of authority above.

The camera moves to full shots of the dancers, who perform in front of a projection of raging flames. Their movements are intensely masculine, and sexual: they flex their muscles, throw themselves to the concrete floor, thrust their pelvises into the air with arched backs, and gather in a circular huddle. The men ultimately separate into pairs, where the homoerotic themes become more explicit, and the dance moves more intimately aggressive. Cha Cha-style choreography transgresses into physical entanglements reminiscent of sport wrestling. One couple engages in a stylised choking scene where one partner grabs the other's neck before rolling his body back, diffusing the violence through the erotic motion. Still in pairs, one of the partners grabs the other by the waist, and throws them in a plank position to the concrete floor, while mounted above him [Figure 38]. The masculinity of wrestling and sport huddles has been appropriated into highly choreographed homoerotic display, subverting the heterosexist paradigms of fraternity and violence.



Figure 38: Lady Gaga, *Alejandro*, directed by Steven Klein, (2010)

In the next montage, Lady Gaga engages with the dancers, theatricalizing a sexual exchange of dominant roles. She straddles a man in heels who lays face down on a bed, then simulates

sex beneath one of her male counterparts. She is picked up from behind with her legs wrapped around the man's body, while he places his hand around her throat. As mentioned in the introduction of this section, this material reads of the theatrical "cruelty" that Artaud believed necessary for an audience to intellectually engage with the work. Lady Gaga echoes these intentions in the following passage:

I'm not going to make a guy drool the way a Britney [Spears] video does. So I take it to extremes. I don't say I dress sexily on stage - what I do is so extreme. It's meant to make guys think: 'I don't know if this is sexy or just weird.'<sup>227</sup>

In this passage, Lady Gaga affirms that sexual images, such as the examples above, are meant to engage her audiences with questions of sexuality. In the above sequence the position of dominance and masculinity is repeatedly exchanged in a kind of choreographed battle, perhaps bringing us to question how these factors effect our desire of the subject that displays them.

After the funeral procession, Lady Gaga appears in a bra with a gun attached to each breast. Usually associated with sustaining life, her breast becomes a threatening weapon. Neither her body, nor her sexuality is available, but protected, and fortified. The video returns to the group of young male dancers who throw Lady Gaga's body amongst them, while violently groping and kissing her. Images of fire, riots, and war continue to be intercut in a montage mirroring the provocative sexual images. These shots are then spliced with images of Lady Gaga in her nun costume, lying in bed, suggesting these are images she has fantasised. Widowed, she manifests her desire into homoerotic fantasy that will not be consummated, protecting her vow of celibacy. In the process of these fantasies, however, we see her adopt a progressively masculine role as if becoming less reluctant to commit to the fantasies meant to protect her from her sexuality. The video concludes with Lady Gaga in bed in her oxblood

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<sup>227</sup> "Lady Gaga: I'm not super sexy," *Metro*, January 21, 2009, <http://metro.co.uk/2009/01/21/lady-gaga-im-not-super-sexy-357717/>

nun's habit as her face disintegrates into circles of white light achieved through a burning effect.

#### M.I.A.: Realism

In the video, *Bad Girls* (2012), M.I.A.'s critiques Saudi Arabia's laws prohibiting women from driving, and subverts the perceptions of women which have informed such restrictions. After sweeping shots of an empty desert, a tableau is shown of Muslim women in full burkas made of decorative prints, looking directly at the camera, standing next to a silver BMW. We get close-up shots of some of the women, who wear aviator sunglasses with metallic, reflective frames, and leopard print or designer, silk scarves, subverting the traditional limitations on self-expression imposed by the all-covering garment [Figure 39, 40].



Figure 39: M.I.A., *Bad Girls*, (2012)



Figure 40: Detail, M.I.A., *Bad Girls*, 2012

These women appropriate control over their identities through elaborate re-configuring of traditional dress. Joan Riviere's comments on the disguise of femininity compliment this assertion:

“Femininity is constituted in the dissembling or the masking of women's masculinity, by burying it beneath a veil of decoration. She makes no claims for an inherent femininity but rather constructs feminine identity as an alienated social performance.”<sup>228</sup>

The masking of masculinity suggested by Riviere is complicated further in these images. The women are fully masked in attire that marks them as female. Though in this case, it is their expression of femininity through their more intricate styling that subverts the limitations of their imposed female mask. However, they allow their masculinity to pervade and re-surface through their actions and posturing which deny any further restrictions of that feminine iconography.

A shot shows a wall with graffiti, followed by a shot of M.I.A. in an olive-green bomber jacket, gold chain, and basic black shirt, contrasting the look of the Muslim women. The shot

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<sup>228</sup> Joan Riviere, “Womanliness is a Masquerade,” *Formations of Fantasy* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 35.



changes to the interior of the car. A woman is behind the wheel, wearing black leather gloves, with gold embellishments. She grips and releases the wheel with her arm outstretched over the top of the wheel as a physical cue for authority and anticipation. In *Women Driving: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth Century America*, author Deborah Clarke asserts that, "in providing access to the public sphere—to work, to escape—the car transformed women's lives as profoundly as suffrage."<sup>229</sup> She speaks about American culture, and the sense of freedom that the subjects in M.I.A.'s video seek to appropriate with the illegal stunts that follow.

Two covered women lean out the windows of a moving car. The passenger has her whole body outside the car, while the driver watches the road with her head out the window, and her fist raised and clenched in the air, in a gesture of empowerment. Scenes cut between dangerous car tricks, and drag races, where the vehicles spin out of control. These actions of defiance are of note for their performative qualities. In this context, the dangerous, bold, and fearless actions of the women seek to establish a new, independent, and more masculine definition of their womanhood.

The video switches to a shot of a man arriving to the desert alone to confront one of the cars on horseback. The horse bucks back as if referencing the same free will the women are expressing by driving. The crew of drivers, cars, and spectators grows, creating an entourage that feels like something between a gang and a parade. Two white cars roll down the road on just their two side wheels. M.I.A. is shown perched on the side of the tilted vehicle, filing her nails nonchalantly in tinted sunglasses, before assuming a supine position as the car continues on. The shot nods to her femininity, without defining it as any sort of social limit. As the scene turns to night, the women move into another dance scene in metallic and dayglo jumpsuits. The following montage shows fun, danger, and freedom. The group of drivers and spectators move as a collective, led by M.I.A. with more stunts, and images of the audience cheering them on. The man who arrived to the desert on horseback is seen being chased away

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<sup>229</sup> Deborah Clarke, *Women Driving: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 3.

by the pursuant cars. Subsequently, the driver of the car that M.I.A. was riding on leans their arm out their window, and drags a knife on the road. The last shot of the video shows M.I.A. sitting with a group of men, and one young boy, perhaps referencing gender solidarity.

#### Brooke Candy: Fag Mob Opulence

I have chosen to conclude with the video *Opulence* (2014), by Brooke Candy. Though she is an emerging artist, the video received over 400,000 views in the week after its release. Candy is a lesbian rapper from Los Angeles, signed to major label, RCA Records. Candy's video begins with her attacking a man in a bathroom. Their quarrel over money leaves the man dead. Candy has twisted his neck between stiletto heels. Though the Theatre of Cruelty does not rely on the display of literal cruelty, it also does not exclude violence as a means of achieving its aims. Artaud outlines this in the following passage:

"The *Theatre of Cruelty* has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid."<sup>230</sup>

Here, Artaud specifies that the cruelty needed to engage his audience will be "bloody when necessary." This is perhaps the same credo Candy's character holds in relation to her survival. The scene suggests that, in order to sustain herself, Candy must kill the man that attacks her. The scene provides what Artaud calls a "passionate and convulsive conception of life," as she sacrifices one life to protect her own. This opening act of literal violence can be seen as both a subversion of classic standards of femininity, and exemplary of the kind of jarring action aligned with Theatre of Cruelty.

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<sup>230</sup> Antonin Artaud, "The Theatre of Cruelty: The Second Manifesto," in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, Ed. Eric Bentley (London: Pelican Books, 1968), 66.

The next shot films Candy from behind a bathroom cabinet, showing its contents, and acting like a mirror for Candy. On the shelf of the cabinet is a glass cross standing upright, bottles of perfume, and a filled wine glass. In these shots femininity is treated as having its own kind of artillery, used to weaponise the cisgender female body.

Candy is shown in various shots, playing with feminine constructions of her identity. One shot of Candy shows her in a mask of diamonds, crafted to look like a skull, with wide, sunken eye holes, and broad, vacant mouth region [Figure 41]. In another shot, she wears white contacts with oval pupils, and has a line of rhinestones running down her face, with lips are covered in glitter [Figure 42]. Candy glamourises the eerie and grotesque, widening the scope of feminine representation.



Figure 41: Brooke Candy, *Opulence*, 2014



Figure 42: Brooke Candy, *Opulence*, 2014

Over the course of the video, Candy assumes seven additional costumes, ranging from a Marie Antoinette-style white wig, a black headdress with sequined doll arms coming out of it, to a diamond Native American-style headdress. Candy suggests that identity is not only unfixed, but potentially even disposable. Gender representation is subsumed by an array of full-body veneers.

We see Candy arrive at a party from the back. The attendants of the party are dressed in bondage and fetish gear, including a pair of French maids with nipple pasties, and latex uniforms, who are later shown kissing. Candy lays down on a table at the party, where she spreads her legs, and touches herself in front of the camera. In the following passage Marsha Meskimmon explores a feminist performance piece from the late 1970's, which may help to contextualise the sexual themes of Candy's video:

“In 1979, Croatian artist Sanja Iveković performed the work *Triangle*, simulating masturbation on the balcony of her Yugoslavian home as Marshal Tito's motorcade passed by, knowing she was under police surveillance. The action was seen as a direct confrontation with the power of the state, and Iveković was stopped and forced to go back inside her apartment by the secret service. In this action, female sexuality became a means of political critique simply by moving from the domestic interior, to the balcony, signifying a transgression of the border between safely contained (unseen, unspoken) female desire and its dangerous counterpart, visible female sexual agency.”<sup>231</sup>

Like Iveković, Candy expresses agency and self-possession through explicit public view of her sexuality. She is both publicly on view as the center of the party, and on view for the video's audience. She confronts the gaze of the camera, perhaps reminding us that despite this view, her body and self are ultimately unavailable to us. Candy echoes this power of withholding sex in an interview where she explained:

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<sup>231</sup> Meskimmon, “Chronology Through Cartography,” 334.

“Pussy is a weapon’...Women are so fucking powerful. Pussy is where life comes from...If we withheld sex, women would have all the power and that is why it is a weapon.”<sup>232</sup>

In this passage, Candy expresses the power of sexuality for its necessity to procreation, and the power of women to control it. Germaine Greer further echoes the power of the kind of female sexual agency displayed by Candy in the following passage:

“It is often falsely assumed, even by feminists, that sexuality is the enemy of the female who really wants to develop these aspects of her personality...It was not the insistence upon her sex that weakened the American woman...but the insistence upon a passive sexual role.”<sup>233</sup>

As shown by her aggressive quotes, and overt displays of sexuality, Candy is anything but passive. Candy combats the sexual role of women that Greer also identifies as problematic.

The video concludes in a rapid succession of images of Candy, followed by her logo at the end of the video: two hands linked by a loose chain, presenting middle fingers, which are crossed over one another, underscored by the words, “FAG MOB,” the name of Candy’s creative team. It is of note that Fag Mob is here inclusive of director, Steven Klein, who also directed Lady Gaga’s *Alejandro* video, and Lady Gaga’s former stylist, Nichola Formichetti. The relationship between the reoccurring themes of gender, and the creative pair stands to question the extent of Lady Gaga’s or Brooke Candy’s responsibility for crafting the subversive images with which they are so closely aligned. Throughout the video, gender is all but obscured, as the song suggests, through the opulence of costume. What remains is aggressive sexual agency, put forth in a public space as self-possessed confrontation.

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<sup>232</sup> Brandon Taylor, “Brooke Candy’s Brand of Feminism,” *Swide*, February 27, 2013, <http://www.swide.com/art-culture/music-interview/brooke-candy-new-female-rapper-the-interview-in-milan/2013/2/27>

<sup>233</sup> Greer, *Female Eunuch*, 77.

### Conclusion: Assimilation

When I began this chapter it seemed that since the legalisation of same sex-marriage in 2003, that music video was following the social trend toward gender equality through greater queer and feminist representation in the medium. The view I have of this progression has since become more nuanced and multifaceted. There are extremely few queer artists in the mainstream. Sam Smith, Adam Lambert, and Frank Ocean are perhaps the most prominent male examples, and arguably represent themselves with homonormative imagery, or imagery that obscures the representation of their sexuality altogether. Lisa Dugan's particular definition of homonormativity perhaps best highlights the downfall of such a strategy:

“[homonormativity] does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>234</sup>

As Dugan's suggests, homonormativity fails to claim queer space, or express its character and validity. Rather, homonormative representations preserve existing systems and limits, by seeking to adapt to them. The rarity and bravery of these men being “Out” as mainstream artists bares its own political significance. Though not exactly “privatised” in that regard, all are, however, fairly a-political in their video work. As previously mentioned, despite recently incorporating small amounts of queer imagery in his work, Ocean makes no overt references to his sexuality in his videos, nor are his videos embedded with any critique of a system in which he kept that sexuality private for so long. Lambert makes his stand with the unabashed expression of his flamboyant persona, though he is typically embedded in heteronormative culture, where said persona is created through rampant consumption of designer goods, and cosmetic abundance. Though these two artists might stand to exemplify greater acceptance of queer artists in the mainstream, their video work seems self-satisfied to have assimilated into

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<sup>234</sup> Lisa Dugan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the attack on Democracy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

popular culture, and complacent about advancing that acceptance further through a broader view of a policed system.

That broader view is, however, certainly highlighted by several of the queer artists explored in this chapter who fall outside the mainstream. Le1f, Peaches, and SSION, for example, use iconography in imagined environments, which makes an anti-assimilation critique of heterosexual systems: Le1f's use of commercial goods in deviant sex acts, Peaches' libidinal lesbian imagery set in a domestic space which must be uncovered, SSION's appropriation of masculine symbols, and his departure and invasion of policed institutions such as a school and a suburban home. Their sexuality is overt and usually defined by the dynamics of the video, though the narratives never portray typical romances where a couple ultimately comes together, or falls apart in the melodramatic tradition of so many heterosexual narratives played out in film and video.

Artists' critiques of Lady Gaga is also of note for her tenuous alignment with queer culture from the mainstream. Gaga defies feminine and masculine boundaries, supposedly in the name of empowering women and the gay community, though her significance to the queer community has been criticised by other queer female artists. Peaches explained the difference between herself and Gaga by saying, "She has television as her outlet, which I don't. I'm not really invited on TV. They don't want me on TV because I'm old, I don't know, I'm weird."<sup>235</sup> Lesbian front woman of the band, The Gossip, Beth Ditto echoes:

"For my group of friends is Lady Gaga eye-opening? No. She's a less dangerous version of what was so cool about pop culture in the 80s. Back then it was so gay and so punk in so many ways."<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Scott Colothan, "Peaches Calls Gaga a 'Very Polished Diva,'" *Gigwise*, November 18, 2009, <http://www.gigwise.com/news/53500/peaches-lady-gaga-is-a-very-polished-diva> www.gigwise.com.

<sup>236</sup> Tim Jonze, "In Bed With Beth Ditto," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2011/mar/16/in-bed-with-beth-ditto>.

Despite the similarities of aesthetics, sound, and message in their work, Peaches reiterates the fact that she has not been assimilated into the mainstream, while Ditto belittles Gaga's work as comparably safe, and less controversial than that which preceded it decades before. The fact that these women are in direct competition with Gaga is fair to note as possible motivation for their harsh critiques, though it affirms that they have not assimilated to her mainstream glorification of gender equality—they have not “bought in,” as it were, to her, or the equality she purports to advance and represent. Lady Gaga’s attitude, and the attitude against her might be understood further through the following quote from David Harvey:

“It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration and reconstruction of naked class power, locally as well as trans-nationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism.”<sup>237</sup>

Harvey essentially identifies egalitarian buzzwords as rebranding capitalist practices—a strategy which Gaga could certainly be accused of adopting. Though perhaps transparent to gay artists with whom she also stands in competition, is this not still a more positive capitalist venture than the glut of violent, sexist, homophobic propaganda still unapologetically produced?

As we have seen in the previous section, the mainstream is marked with a few renegades whose work has warranted elaboration for its cinematic value and violent critiques of heterosexist representation. These, and other works by queer artists have expanded the vocabulary of gender represented in music video, and have reignited an anti-assimilation campaign which leads more by exemplary subversion than declarative social activism. The relationship of queer representation in the mainstream to a capitalist agenda is tenuous one, though perhaps an investment worth making if it means proving heterosexist norms less valuable.

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<sup>237</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.



### Chapter III

#### Performance and Ownership of Queer Black Feminism

"I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros  
 I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils  
 Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me-  
 I got a hot sauce in my bag. Swag."<sup>238</sup>

As with previous chapters, this section explores the subversive visual within a cultural context. The works included below explore the intersection of black sexual and racial identity, in dialogue with the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2012. Some of these works overtly reference the organisation, while others' queer and feminist imagery represents the movement's mission toward greater visibility, acceptance, and protection of all black bodies—specifically those further marginalised by gender and sexuality. This chapter also returns to the dramatic theory of Bertolt Brecht as a means of considering how these performances are further complicated, and actualised through their relationship with their audience.

While it is regrettable that this chapter does not cover works by artists of more varied races and cultures, this was not a choice that reflects any idea that the Black Lives Matter movement might preclude support of other subjugated racial groups. Rather, this absence is symptomatic of a comparable lack of work made in this time frame by, for example, Hispanic or Asian artists, which I might qualify as having elements of gender subversion worth exploring at length. For example, the videos of queer, London-based, Venezuelan electronic artist, Arca were of interest, but typically focus on a single image— either his body, or a computer-animated figure of ambiguous gender—moving in vaguely sexual manor. His videos lack the kind of additional images, or narrative that complicate and contextualise

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<sup>238</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016.

relationships, environments, and identities.<sup>239</sup> The video work of Uruguay's Dani Umpi, though rich with surreal characters, and queer iconography, is an extension of his main focus—his visual and performance art practice. As such, his videos might be better placed in dialogue with the oeuvres of similar visual artists, who also work with music video, such as Andrew Thomas Huang, or visual artists that maintain a performance practice, such as Kembra Pfahler (*The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*). Other queer, non-black, artists of color incorporating subversive gender imagery, include Brazil's Rico Dasalam, Mexico's Zemmoa, and Spain's, *La Prohibida*. However, rather than attempt to tie these few artists into a discourse embedded in American history and politics, where—unlike Central and South America where the artists I have mentioned hail from—people of color are the minority, I have chosen to narrow my focus for a more concentrated analysis. Preferably, given a wider array of subversive work, this text could have taken a more global perspective of the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and culture. The noticeable lack of queer work by artists of a broader range of races and cultures is echoed by Doris Leibetseder, who has also focused on queer modes of subversion in music in her book, *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music* (2012):

"One difficulty that I did not manage to overcome to my satisfaction was to find queer musicians of various racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. I tried to solve this problem with the help of postcolonial mimicry, where I at least gave two examples—Grace Jones and Bishi. Luckily I came across the hip-hop bands of colour, Yo! Majesty and The Lost Bois and whilst I was finishing the conclusion, I found the names Miz Korona, Mz Jonz, Thee Satisfaction, Las Krudas, Skim, Collin Clay, Big Freedra, and Karlyn Heffernan."<sup>240</sup>

I have included this passage to confirm a shared frustration among scholars for a lack of diversity in popular music, though I find similar inadequacy in Leibetseder's mention of these

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<sup>239</sup> Regrettably, in the final stages of this thesis, Arca released a suite of outstanding videos anchored by themes of gender subversion: *Anoche* (2017), *Desfío* (2017), and *Reverie* (2017); all directed by long-time collaborator, Jessie Kanda.

<sup>240</sup> Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks*, 194.

contemporary queer, black, hip-hop artists, without any analysis of their work. My own decision to exclude some of the artists she mentions in this text is due to their lack of subversive gender imagery in their videos, specifically. This is the same reason for the absence of further discussion of videos by the very few queer Asian artists I found, such as Japan's Ki Yo, and Hong kong's Chet Lam and Enno Cheng. I would also like to clarify that some works by black artists, which are certainly of note for their queer and feminist merits, such as the Grace Jones' video, *I'm Not Perfect, But I'm Perfect for You* (1986), directed by Keith Haring, Rupaul's *Back to My Roots* (1993) and *A Shade Shady* (1993) or Lil Kim's *Crush on You* (1997), have been excluded in prioritisation of examining works made during this critical social moment.

The works in this chapter bring us to question the multi-faceted complexities faced by their subjects: Why am I not an American if I am black? Why am I not black if I am queer? . Defiant of a history of erasure, these videos show black queer and feminist bodies, affirming their struggle and their existence. In some of these works, the very proclamations of blackness are of note for their rare enunciation in popular music. These tracks' and videos' expression of pride in, and ownership of blackness adds an element which is at once exclusionary to white audiences (a contradiction to the perception of popular media as being accessible and inclusionary), yet vital to the project of black visibility and affirmation. We are brought to question how different meaning is created amongst audiences of different races, and also how that same exclusionary element may simply go unquestioned when white artists fail to make music with which people of color may identify. However, while these videos may work towards a correction of the lack of representation inherent in the continued marginalisation of these groups, we will also consider how authentic those representations are, and whether they also represent the artist, or simply the artist's desire to participate in the growth and veneration of Black Lives Matter.

Because the privileged position of some of the artists we will discuss starkly contrasts the lower cultural status of the subjects in their videos, and the majority of the audiences watching them (regardless of race), these videos are not without certain tensions that bare

addressing across existing black studies discourse. Specifically, we will explore work by sociologists, W.E.B. Du Bois and Elijah Anderson, and feminist, Cathy Cohen, who examine black identity, the social hierarchies produced around respect, deviance, the breakdown of normative family structures, and gender roles in black communities. We will also consider the writing of bell hooks, whose criticisms of black female representation in popular media often contradict these works' supposed value as feminist.

Before I elaborate on some specific questions of this section, I would like to establish that this chapter is not meant to explore the precarity of dueling identities: whether a subject may privilege, for example, their black identity over their queer identity, or vice versa. It is also not my intention to locate blackness as a source of subversion, but consider how it further complicates the gender issues we have explored hereto, and how Black Lives Matter may have inspired more provocative and explicit enunciations of gendered blackness in recent video work. This chapter also does not seek to compare and contrast queer and feminist representations by artists of color to those made by white artists, which would perpetuate the kind of binary thinking inherent in racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The specific meaning drawn from subversive representations of gender made by artists of color will be considered through some of the following questions: How is blackness performed to queer and feminist effect? How is the message of queer and feminist work by artists of color shaped by its respective audiences? Can highly visible and wealthy pop stars such as Beyoncé fairly and accurately represent marginalised black subcultures? Due to the aforementioned ties of these questions, and the objects of study to Black Lives Matter, I will begin with a brief review of the movement.

Drawing inspiration from the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, Black Lives Matter was created in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, for the shooting of unarmed, black, 17-year-old, Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. The movement gained global support and recognition following two similar cases where black, unarmed suspects were killed by members of law enforcement who were not indicted: the ,

both in 2014 shooting of 18 year old, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the suffocation of 43 year old, Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. Both of these cases produced slogans and symbols which were employed in protest by activist groups, and are of note for the allusions made to them in popular music, and music video. For example, because Michael Brown was believed to have put his hands up in surrender to his killer, protesters across the country employed the chant, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” and gathered in groups with their arms raised, mirroring Brown’s alleged pose of surrender.<sup>241</sup> Beyoncé referenced this in her track, "7/11" (2014), repeating, "My hands up, my hands up. Flexin' while my hands up. My hands up, my hands up. I stand up with my hands up." By adding to the phrase that she is standing up, and "flexin',"—as in standing up for herself, and flexing her muscles—she brings a power to the phrase historically aligned with surrender, and contextually representative of systemic violence. She is simultaneously protesting the death of Brown through the phrase, while asserting strength and unity, rather than victimhood and sorrow. In "Feedback" (2016), Kanye West incorporates the reference with a more direct accusation of police; he sings, "Hands up, we just doing what the cops taught us. Hands up, hands up, then the cops shot us."

In the case of Eric Garner, his final words, “I can’t breath,” repeated eleven times as shown in a video taken by bystander, Ramsey Orta, have been directly quoted or referenced by artists to protest his death, and reflect Black Lives Matter more broadly. In Rhianna's "American Oxygen" (2015), she sings, "Breathe out, breathe in, American Oxygen. Every breath I breathe, chasin' the American dream." With these lyrics, she invokes the idea of air, breath, and life as tied to the freedom, justice, and ambition synonymous with "the American dream." By this logic, when Garner, "can't breath," his liberties have been compromised, and we must question why. Spliced with sections of Rhianna singing in front of a waving American flag, the song's video is largely comprised of footage of significant moments of black resistance, and black achievement: scenes from the riots that ensued in Ferguson after Brown's death, Barack Obama, the first American President of color, taking the oath of office;

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<sup>241</sup> It remains unclear whether Brown did, or did not raise his hands to surrender. Several witnesses claiming that he did raise his hands were ultimately discredited in the trial.

and track stars, John Carlos and Tommie Smith giving the Black Power salute during their medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. While celebrating black Americans, the video also suggests the difficulty of being recognised *as* American as a person of color—of being given the same rights and liberties as white Americans—perhaps drawing us back to racism as the source of the injustice acted on Garner. In addition to these examples by Beyoncé, West, and Rhianna, the abundance of work produced in direct response to Black Lives Matter has been tracked by the website, Sounds of BLM. At the time of writing it had cited 105 musical tracks, and 32 videos by a diverse group of artists ranging from Russian, queer feminist, punk band, Pussy Riot, to black, American, male, rappers such as Kendrick Lamar and Yasiin Bey (formerly, Mos Def).

Since the deaths of Brown and Garner, attention has been brought to dozens of other cases of police brutality and institutionalised violence against unarmed black subjects. In light of this, it should be noted that detractors of the movement often distill Black Lives Matter down to an anti-police movement, and cite the high instances of black on black violence in areas such as Chicago as contradicting the movement's mission. I argue, however, that this is a separate issue tied to drug and gang violence, and availability of firearms, rather than racism, let alone racism that it laced within a system that allows loss of life to go unpunished when homicide is committed by members within that system. In addition to the frequent references made to the movement in popular music, Black Lives Matter has also become a prevalent part of national dialogue as evidenced by its discussion among candidates throughout the United States' 2016 presidential race, and continued rallies and protests around the world. Before turning focus to some of the videos whose compelling images and complicated symbols warrant further analysis, it is worth clarifying that this chapter's focus on Black Lives Matter bares particular relevance to this thesis for the movement's queer politics—an element absent from the rhetoric of past black liberation movements. In addition to its mission of combatting racism, Black Lives Matter makes a point of expressing equal attention to its queer faction in the following statement from their official website:

"Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers on those that have been marginalised within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement."<sup>242</sup>

The above statement reinforces that Black Lives Matter is, in itself, a queer movement, and a movement for other marginalised groups. Thus, the queer consciousness of Black Lives Matter should be considered a distinct element of cisgender artists' message when they invoke the dogma of the movement through their videos. Videos about Black Lives Matter are inherently queer. Conversely, though queer artists of color such as Lelf and Mykki Blanco may not directly reference Black Lives Matter in their videos, they fundamentally echo the movement's affirmation of queer, black bodies, and the value of their representation. In the following section I would like to consider some of these videos which posit blackness as an integral part of their feminism and queerness.

#### Solange

On Solange Knowles' album, *A Seat at the Table* (2016), the track, "Don't Touch My Hair" confronts the invasion of her person, blackness, and womanhood by those ignorant to difference. The video begins with slow motion footage of Solange, shaking her head, as her braided and beaded hair moves around her neck and shoulders. In a subsequent shot from overhead, Solange sings up into the camera surrounded by black couples and small groups, who touch through minimal choreography [Figure 43]. Our attention is drawn to the beauty

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<sup>242</sup> "About Black Lives Matter," *Black Lives Matter*, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>, (accessed April 10, 2016).

of black bodies in motion, whose subliminal rhythms suggest connection and shared experience.



Figure 43: Solange, *Don't Touch My Hair*, 2016

The music lifts slightly in energy as Solange brings in more aggressive lines like, "You know this hair is my shit rode the ride, I gave it time, but this here is mine." The line expresses a possession and defense of black physicality described by Natalegé Whaley:

"Hair is used as a metaphor for our entire essence on ["Don't Touch My Hair"] and is the perfect symbol, as our hair is one thing that has always been policed throughout history and into the present."<sup>243</sup>

The feminine black essence Whaley refers to is highlighted by Solange in a series of tableaux that marry natural blackness with defiance of negative stereotypes. Women with natural afros peel vegetables in white slips, seemingly indifferent to being filmed, unlike so many black women whose gross objectification in music video has an established history, from Snoop Dogg's, *Ain't Nothin' but a 'G' Thang* (1992) to Young Thug's *Turn Up* (2016). Solange is then shown singing poolside, perhaps combatting the trope that African Americans are afraid

<sup>243</sup> Natelegé Whaley, "Solange's 'Don't Touch My Hair' Is An Anthem Reclaiming Black Autonomy," *Huffington Post*, October 6, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/solanges-dont-touch-my-hair-is-an-anthem-reclaiming\\_us\\_57f67383e4b030884674abca](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/solanges-dont-touch-my-hair-is-an-anthem-reclaiming_us_57f67383e4b030884674abca)



of water for lack of swimming skills.<sup>244</sup> She surrounds herself with black women, who are similarly unaffected as the trio in the previous shot. Their backs turn away from the camera. They are not sexualised, nor do they appease, or even meet the gaze of the viewer. Lastly, likely referencing her lyric, "Don't touch my crown," Solange stands at the edge of a church pew, with her hair braided into a crown-like shape atop her head. Five black women stand from the pew, some with hair in a similar style, though all of the women wear extravagant avant garde costumes. The highly geometric, ruffled, electric blue constructions simultaneously pay homage to, and re-define the "Sunday best" dress code often strictly, and often ostentatiously abided by southern women of god, in particular [Figure 44].



Figure 44: Baptist Congregation, Jacksonville Florida, 2010

These images focus on the kind of black womanhood that bell hooks laments is often subsumed by other sexed and raced categories which hold greater power, and thus receive greater visibility. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women in Feminism* (1981), bell hooks addresses the precarious social position of subjects such as those portrayed in *Don't Touch My Hair*:

<sup>244</sup> Finlo Rohrer, "Why Don't Black Americans Swim?," *BBC*, September 3, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11172054>

"No other group in America has so had their identity socialised out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognised as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group "women" in this culture."<sup>245</sup>

Since the publication of this text, more nuanced identity politics have emerged, which stand to complicate hooks' overriding thesis: how do queer and trans subjects further highlight the narrow the scope of our social awareness to womanhood? Who else remains "socialised out of existence?" While our attention to subjectivities within gender categories ultimately strives for a unifying, equalizing politics, Solange carves space within Womanhood that bell hooks problematises as obscuring the black female experience. Solange also asserts the critical boundaries she must set in protection of her dignity, and to demand respect: Don't touch her hair, or treat her as objectified other. In the track she also says not to touch the pride, glory, or feelings, that *are* her hair, which *is* her blackness, which is not removable from her womanhood or feminism.

Julianne Escobedo Shepherd wrote for Pitchfork that the track addresses, "the way black women are devalued, and meets that with resistance,"<sup>246</sup> and calls Solange's voice, "a palliative for the pain she describes, as she names truths to divest them of their power."<sup>247</sup> The video for the track resists the devaluation of black women noted by Escobedo Shepherd by celebrating black physicality, femininity, and connection. In addition to naming painful truths to divest them of power, she also uses video to powerfully fortify images of feminine black womanhood.

#### Zebra Katz

Zebra Katz gained international attention when his single, "Ima Read" (2012) was used in fashion designer, Rick Owens' autumn runway show at Paris Fashion Week in 2012. The

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<sup>245</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (Brooklyn: South End Press, 1981), 7.

<sup>246</sup> Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, "Solange: A Seat at the Table," *Pitchfork*, October 5, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22482-a-seat-at-the-table/>

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

track alludes to *Paris is Burning* (1992), a film in which "reading," "shading," and "voguing" are used as queer performative, and competitive strategies. Created on the streets of Harlem in the 1980s, "reading" was, and still is, used to literally read a person by highlighting, often with exaggeration, their flaws: their mannerisms, make up, clothes, their walk, their accent.<sup>248</sup> Though these skills have been named and honed within queer space, their value is further actualised in application against racism and homophobia outside a queer context.

In his book, *Queerness in Pop Music* (2015), Stan Hawkins locates *Paris is Burning* at the foundation of contemporary queer black hip hop culture:

*"Paris is Burning* steers me toward the intersections between music and the categories of class, gender, race, and sexuality. Queer black hip hop artists such as Azealia Banks, Le1f, Mykki Blanco, Cakes da Killa, House of Ladosha, and Zebra Katz reveal an extraordinary approach to queering. Emerging in the 2010s; these artists have extended the aesthetics and ideologies of 'ball culture' and the 'house system.' They have reconfigured the queer strategies of the 1990s according to kinship and choice. Ball culture is one of many instances of shifting trends in popular music, where grabbling with the past becomes part of our future."<sup>249</sup>

To make this assertion, Hawkins draws on the admittedly abundant references made by contemporary queer, black hip hop artists to *Paris is Burning*. In addition to the example of Katz's *Ima Read*, Le1f has incorporated voguing in live performances, and in music videos such as *Koi* (2015), *Wut* (2012), and *Soda* (2012). In his track, "Boom" (2014), Le1f welcomes the listener to "Banjee Burger," a play on the "Banjee" stereotype, and the "Banjee Girl Realness" competition in *Paris is Burning*. In the film, "Banjee" is qualified by one of the judges as, "Looking like the boy that robbed you a few minutes before you came to Paris' ball."

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<sup>248</sup> Hawkins, *Queerness in pop music*, 46.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

Cakes da Killa draws on similar modes of ball culture's glamour and drag in videos such as *Truth Tella* (2014). This black and white video recalls vintage Hollywood headshots, as Cakes da Killa models a series of extravagant women's hats [Figure 45]. He also directly notes his relationship to the film in an interview with music website, THUMP:

"Like many butch queens, ballroom swag has had a huge influence on my musicality and confidence. It was ballroom commentators like Kevin JZ Prodigy like and Gregg Evisu who made me fall in love with riding a beat. I have *Paris Is Burning* to thank for my introduction to the culture."<sup>250</sup>



Figure 45: Cakes da Killa, *Truth Tella*, 2014

Despite confirming the film's influence and importance to his work, his references to ball culture are by no means overly identifiable or consistent, however. For example, the video, *Talkin Greezy* (2016) takes place in unglamorous, unpretentious New York City locales— a run down apartment, Brooklyn stoops, a dominos match in the park, a barber shop— and sees Cakes shed the feminine aesthetics he dons in *Truth Tella* and *Goodie Goodies* (2013) for casual, masculine, athletic gear and the kind of gold mouth piece popularised by mainstream

<sup>250</sup>Max Moheno, "Five Artists Tell Us About the Lasting Impact of 'Paris is Burning' 25 Years Later," *THUMP*, August 12, 2016, [https://thump.vice.com/en\\_us/article/paris-is-burning-25-year-anniversary](https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/paris-is-burning-25-year-anniversary).

rap figures. As previously asserted in chapter one, Hawkins also mis-identifies Blanco as a latter day product of ball culture. Instead, Blanco frequently references the influence of punk, riotgrrrl, and performance artists such as Yoko Ono. Azealia Banks does make frequent references to voguing and banjee girls, as in the tracks, "Fierce" (2012), and "Van Vogue" (2012), though neither her video work, nor her general image rely on the token aesthetics of ball culture, such as voguing, cinematic glamour, or variations of drag. This leads me to the point of this reconsideration of Hawkins' claims.

Hawkins' suggestion that contemporary queer hip hop has effectively been sourced from *Paris is Burning*—which, requires substantiation beyond these artists' sharing queerness, blackness, and the occasional choreography with the subjects documented in the film—stands to limit the discourse around these artists. By comparing these artists to subjects in *Paris is Burning*, Hawkins removes these artists from contemporary hip hop discourse, drawing them back in time, rather than considering how they might impact, or be affected by the present. By comparison, this dissertation has looked at Mykki Blanco and Le1f alongside their contemporaries, SSION and Frank Ocean, among others. It is, in fact, in an effort to look forward, that I have focused on Hawkins' argument, as will soon be made more clear. Another way that Hawkins' comparison is limiting is in the precarious relationship it draws between these artists, and the imitative and appropriative strategies adopted by the subjects of *Paris is Burning*. In the film, drag contestants rely on imitation and appropriation of commercial feminine aesthetics to make them feel secure—secure in their feminine identity, but also, literally safe. In the film there are competitions for "Realness," which drag queen, and ball hostess, Dorian Corey calls, the ability to pass as a "real woman," or to closet their homosexuality so effectively that, as Corey elaborates in the film:

"They're undetectable. When they can walk out of that ballroom, and into the sunlight, and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the femme realness queens."<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Dorian Corey, *Paris is Burning*, Directed by Jennie Livingston, (1990; New York, NY: Miramax, 2005) DVD.

As this quote highlights, for many of the subjects in *Paris is Burning*, drag was a system of survival predicated on constructed norms of femininity, and specifically *white* femininity, which is further echoed by bell hooks in the following passage:

"For black males to take appearing in drag seriously, be they gay or straight, is to oppose a heterosexist representation of black manhood. Gender bending and blending on the part of black males has always been a critique of phallogentric masculinity in traditional black experience. Yet the subversive power of those images is radically altered when informed by a racialised fictional construction of the "feminine" that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender, that is to say when the idealised notion of the female/feminine is really a sexist idealisation of white womanhood. This is brutally evident in Jennie Livingstone's new film, *Paris is Burning*."<sup>252</sup>

When Hawkins claims that contemporary queer hip hop artists have "extended the aesthetics and ideologies of ball culture," I neither think that he considers hooks argument, and how he ultimately deflects white imitation and appropriation onto these artists, nor do I believe that what hooks proposes negates the positive aspects of ball culture to which, I think, Hawkins does allude: community, support, collaboration, creativity, and the ability of marginalised queer and black subjects to make power marked by status and beauty—however contentious those qualifiers are—their own. The point here is that while the references made to *Paris in Burning* are worthy of note, they do not constitute the basis for these artists' work, nor does a discourse focused on establishing that foundation service an accurate reading of the broader landscape of contemporary hip hop. In the following passage taken from an interview with *The Village Voice*, Le1f references an article for music site, Pitchfork, and echoes the disproportionate focus paid in the article to the relationship between ball culture and himself and Zebra Katz:

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<sup>252</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 1992), 147.

"I didn't think there was enough of a distinction between what was going on in terms of our musical scene and the ballroom/voguing scene. There are ties and references and things I definitely did say about it, but it's not as though I'm going to balls, and my music is not at the ballrooms. That's a totally different set of producers and vocalists and culture entirely. So I wish that that was made a little bit more clear and put together, and I know that Ojay [Zebra Katz] agrees."<sup>253</sup>

In the same interview, Le1f notably mentions his dance background, and that his interest in voguing is shared with other dance forms born of reactionary motives, such as butoh and movement incorporated in Fluxus. Among other musical influences, Le1f notably highlights other contemporary hip hop artists, A\$AP Rocky, Mykki Blanco, and Lakutis,<sup>254</sup> clearly in an effort to draw his work in dialogue with the contemporary music scene. And, unlike the subjects of *Paris is Burning*, whose balls are, as house mother, Pepper Lebeija explains, "more or less our fantasy of being a superstar— like the Oscars, or being on the runway as a model"<sup>255</sup>—which largely, and historically feature white women— Cakes da Killa and Zebra Katz have, by comparison, sited black female musicians such as Lil Kim<sup>256</sup> and Grace Jones<sup>257</sup> as significant influences.

I have delved into Hawkins' connection of these artists' work to *Paris is Burning* to consider and question aspects of imitation and appropriation of white culture that his alignment is weighted with. Though some of the artists Hawkins mentions do include voguing and references to ball culture, others, such as Blanco, neither hail from this culture, nor reference

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<sup>253</sup> Nick Murray, "Q&A: Le1f," *The Village Voice*, May 4, 2012, <http://www.villagevoice.com/music/qanda-le1f-talks-the-influence-of-ballroom-and-working-with-das-racist-pank-rock-and-nguzunguzu-6603133>.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Pepper LaBeija, *Paris is Burning*, Directed by Jennie Livingston, (1990; New York, NY: Miramax, 2005) DVD.

<sup>256</sup> Brian Josephs, "Q&A: Cakes da Killa Is a Part-Time Pink Moscato Connoisseur and a Full-Time Rapper," *Spin*, November 1, 2016, <http://www.spin.com/2016/11/cakes-da-killahedonism-interview/>.

<sup>257</sup> Hermione Hoby, "Zebra Katz: 'Creating a strong, black, queer male is something that needed to happen,'" *The Guardian*, May 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/may/25/zebra-katz-interview-ima-read>

it in their work. Though Hawkins exaggerates the connection of these artists to ball culture, unpacking his claims also serves to highlight a significant shift between Zebra Katz's *Ima Read*, in 2012, and Katz's work produced after the inception of Black Lives Matter: *IBad B\*tch* (2014) and *Blk Diamond* (2016).

Unlike, *Ima Read*, whose reference to *Paris is Burning* draws on history of queer appropriation, these videos do not seek to adapt white privilege, but rather directly attack it. In *I Bad B\*tch*, Katz arrives at grand white mansion with two white women dressed in nurses uniforms. An elderly white woman answers the door, wearing jewelry and a feather boa, signifying her wealth. Katz's white female accomplices seem to establish that it is not white women that he targets, but rather the white supremacy signified by the array of bleached, overwrought commodities that comprise the older woman's superfluous reality. Katz is lead to a dining room, where four additional white women in opulent dresses are seated. One by one, they are escorted upstairs by Katz, and his nurse characters. The video concludes with a tableau of Katz seated atop a stuffed polar bear. He is flanked by the women, whose frozen position suggests that they have also been made into taxidermy. This is confirmed as the shot zooms out, barely revealing that they are within an exhibit at a Natural History Museum, as exposed by the adjoining cases of stuffed animals [Figure 46]. This video confronts the negative aspects of the kind of appropriative and imitative practices explored in *Paris is Burning*. The wealthy, white, and glamorous are treated as a problem rather than a paradigm, and thus exposed as a false standard of beauty, femininity, and importance.





Figure 46: Zebra Katz, *I Bad B\*tch*, 2014

In *Blk Diamond* (2016) Katz targets systemic oppression by a white, homophobic, patriarchy. The main imagery of the video, which Katz has called, "imagery of cruelty,"<sup>258</sup> focuses on the abuse of Katz by two obese white males. Dressed in only black underwear, the men haul Katz by a rope tied around his ankles, through a meadow of tall grass and dirt. He is dressed in all black, with a leather harness across his chest, and a face mask embellished with diamonds. We see Katz hung upside down, flanked by the two men in a shot hauntingly suggestive of a lynching.<sup>259</sup> One man signals to the other, and a plug is pulled from the core of Katz's body. Metallic liquid begins to pour out and drip down onto Katz's face, suggesting ejaculation. Katz echoes this in the lyrics singing, "Like a black diamond under pressure, loaded up, be my refresher...I'm dark and nutritious, high in protein, and I'm so delicious." Katz literally oozes, and offers his black queer sexuality. We are encouraged to locate this identity as the target of his enemies—stereotypes of homophobic, old, white men, who signify a history of institutionalised racism, from slavery to Donald Trump. The men proceed to drill a large black rock, while laughing maniacally. The scene is intercut with footage of

<sup>258</sup> Michelle Lhoq, "Zebra Katz and Leila's *Blk Diamond* Is a Hauntingly Beautiful Examination of Cruelty," *THUMP*, July 17, 2015, [https://thump.vice.com/en\\_uk/video/zebra-katz-and-leila-blk-diamond-is-a-hauntingly-beautiful-examination-of-cruelty](https://thump.vice.com/en_uk/video/zebra-katz-and-leila-blk-diamond-is-a-hauntingly-beautiful-examination-of-cruelty).

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

Katz in an anguished stagger, spot lit at night, suggesting the unwanted penetration of the "black diamond" Katz has identified himself as.

In these video, Zebra Katz explores highly aestheticised images of queer blackness. His identity is further situated through his dramatised abuse by white male oppressors. While other videos in this chapter celebrate queer and feminist blackness, as Katz's do as well, these works boldly propose how black queer identity has been shaped by those that would seek to ignore, destroy, or change it.

In his foundational black studies text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois explores the idea of a "double-consciousness" in the following passage:

"...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"<sup>260</sup>

He asserts that black subjectivity is formed through black subjects' relationship to a white society, which, at the time of Du Bois' writing (1903) would have been of superior class, if not also actively racist—thus resulting in a perpetual sense of inferiority of the black subject Du Bois discusses. In *Blk Diamond*, Katz's queer blackness is highlighted by his relationship to white male villains. He dramatises his double consciousness by forcing us to view him through the lens of the homophobic, racist, figures he stereotypes in the video.

In these works, Katz breaks with a trope explored by bell hooks' in connection with the Spike Lee film, *Do the Right Thing* (1992):

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<sup>260</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), 2.

"White audiences may enjoy this film because they watch it the same way they approach many television shows with black characters, searching for reassurance that they need not fear that black folks will infringe on their turf."

In this passage, hooks suggests that white viewers derive a sense of security from representations of a kind of localised blackness, safely distanced from white "turf." Katz's works break such boundaries, not by leveling black and white space or cultural norms, through capitulation, but by considering the systemic violence of racism and white privilege, that corrects any notion that white cultural space or history is or has been even vaguely unthreatening.

#### Beyoncé: InFormation

I have chosen to conclude this chapter with a more concentrated analysis of Beyoncé's video, *Formation* (2016). The video sparked unprecedented controversy and national dialogue for its direct references to Black Lives Matter, and the myriad of subversive black, queer feminist iconography, which reinforced the inclusionary project of the movement. Moreover, unlike much of Beyoncé's past work, blackness is arguably performed at a conscious and confrontational level, seemingly motivated by the cultural climate in which it was produced. Beyoncé simultaneously released the track and video for "Formation," the first single from her *Lemonade* album, on February 6, 2016. This was one day after Trayvon Martin's birthday, and one day before she performed the song at the halftime show of Super Bowl 50. This strategy drew attention to Martin's death, to Black Lives Matter, and to the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Black Panthers—a faction of the Black Power movement—which she noted by dressing herself, and her army of black backup dancers in the panthers' signature militant leather jackets and black berets [Figure 47, 48]. It also essentially banked on the track being a literal overnight success, or at least, not a flop. It meant Beyoncé was ready to confront any backlash or criticism (which did, in fact, ensue) for the racially-driven themes of the work head on, at an event that stood, not only as a paradigm of white, heterosexist, masculinity, but one which is typically the most-watched broadcast on television every year in the United States. In this instance, the event garnered

the third largest audience in American television history, with a reported 111.9 million viewers.<sup>261</sup>



Figure 47: Black Panther rally, DeFremery Park, Oakland, California, 1968



Figure 48: Beyoncé, Super Bowl 50, Halftime Performance, 2016

<sup>261</sup> "Super Bowl 50 Draws 111.9 Million TV Viewers, 16.9 Million Tweets," *Nielsen Soundscan*, February 8, 2016, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2016/super-bowl-50-draws-111-9-million-tv-viewers-and-16-9-million-tweets.html>.

While the star's draw was undoubtedly a factor in the increased viewership, the majority of the audience still would have been comprised of the aforementioned white, male faction, according to the recent trends reported by the leading television ratings authority, Nielsen Soundscan.<sup>262</sup> To infiltrate a territory where her obligation to delight and entertain was compounded by a message that would implicate the majority of the audience as complicit to the institutionalised racism protested by Black Lives Matter was a powerful act of subversion, particularly for a black woman, regardless of her level of fame. Even within a black historical context, the ostensible feminisation, and implied *feministisation* of the Black Panthers also subverts the historically masculine face of the movement. Speaking to an audience that grossly outnumbered her demographically, she spoke for those historically least seen, and least heard—a combative representation of black women, black power, and a protest against the continued injustices made on black lives by law enforcement in America.

Like this performance, the feminist subversion inherent in the *Formation* (2016) video lies in Beyoncé using her platform within a commercial landscape created, and dominated by white men to call for the rise and defense of black lives, and specifically black women: "Ok, Ladies, now let's get in formation/information,"<sup>263</sup> she sings in the chorus. By performing feminist identities representative of a scope of classes and cultures, and including queer performers and imagery, Beyoncé validates and elevates black culture, and queer and feminist black bodies through a rarely-achieved level of mainstream visibility. This will be reiterated throughout this chapter, so I want to be clear that by this I do not mean that said culture is of low value, nor that she increases the inherent value of that culture. Rather, by increasing the visibility of black culture—an act reflective of her own valuation of it—it is likely that this valuation would be raised for those whose valuation of her is also high. Below we will explore the identities she performs throughout the video, and how she attempts to actualise the themes of unity and solidarity expressed by the track.

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<sup>262</sup> "Minority Viewership Drives Record Breaking Super Bowl XLIV," *Nielsen Soundscan*, February 12, 2010, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2010/super-bowl-xliv-minority-viewership.html>.

<sup>263</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016.

The video begins with scenes of houses submerged almost entirely in water—a post-Hurricane Katrina representation of New Orleans, Louisiana. An audio clip comes in to support the imagery, and set the intention of the song before the music begins. We are asked, “What happened at the New Wildins [New Orleans].”<sup>264</sup> The rhetorical question recalls the devastation of the natural disaster, which was worsened by inadequate government response. The government’s negligence, moreover, was widely speculated to have been due to New Orleans’ high population of African Americans (over 60%). New Orleans City Councilman, Oliver Thomas commented, “People are too afraid of black people to go in and save them.”<sup>265</sup> The Reverend Jesse Jackson asserted that race was, “at least a factor” in the slow response, and added that, “[Americans] have an amazing tolerance for black pain.”<sup>266</sup>

The clip’s raspy southern drawl belongs to Messy Mya (Anthony Barre), a YouTube personality from New Orleans, who was murdered in 2010 at the age of 22. Though there is debate about Mya’s sexuality, his involvement in the New Orleans’ Bounce music community has aligned him with the queer culture celebrated by the genre’s musicians. One of Bounce’s most prominent figures, also featured on the “Formation” track is trans artist, Big Freedia, who spoke at Mya’s wake. New Orleans natives of color, Messy Mya and Big Freedia represent the disenfranchisement of their city, and return our attention to a country that would ignore such subjects in the wake of disaster. Mya’s inclusion also speaks to black intra-racial violence, which we will discuss later in the chapter in relationship to the perpetuation of masculine hegemony in areas with compromised public authority systems. The inclusion of these queer, underground artists also affirms that Beyoncé’s feminist representation is not limited to biologically sexed women. In regard to *Formation*, Dr. Zandria F. Roberts asserts that, “At [Beyoncé’s] limits, the voices and presence of genderqueer folks enter to take over.”<sup>267</sup> Roberts suggests that while Beyoncé may not self-identify as queer, gay, or trans, she invokes a queer politics by incorporating artists who

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Sean Alfano, “Race An Issue in Katrina Response,” *CBS News*, September 3, 2005, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/race-an-issue-in-katrina-response/>

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Dr. Zandria Roberts, “We Slay, Part I,” *New South Negress*, February 7, 2016, <http://newsouthnegress.com/southernslayings/#more-733>

broaden the representational scope of a work that asserts the rights and equality of all black lives. She represents black queerness, though through her inclusion of trans and queer artists, she does so without falsely claiming the lived experience of a queer person of color.

Despite their bold inclusion on the track, it is worth questioning why Mya and Freedia did not appear in the *Formation* video. Why are they not physically represented, shown, included? One consideration is that these performances are precisely for those that would already be familiar with the raspy voice of Mya, or the deep bellow of Freedia. Without the visual, there is a process of questioning if it could be Freedia—if Beyoncé would be bold enough, *cool* enough, to include the underground artist on her intensely anticipated new single, with extreme commercial expectations. For fans, the reveal is met with surprise and pleasure as the track rolls, and Freedia's identity is confirmed through lines such as, "I did not come to play with you hoes! I came to slay, Bitch. I like cornbread and collard greens, bitch."<sup>268</sup> This line levels her ability to "slay"—a queer term mixing confidence and audacity that expresses the achievement of superiority or success—with her love of soul food; essentially locating her blackness as the source of her queer power. We infer that because she likes cornbread and collard greens—an affirmation of her authenticity as a black southern woman—she will naturally be able to "Slay." This relationship between black agency and signifiers of blackness is explored by Rana A. Emerson in relationship to Erykah Badu's video for "On and On" (1997):

"[Black women's] agency emerged through the identification with signifiers of Blackness; an assertion of autonomy, vocality, and independence; and expressions of partnership, collaboration, and sisterhood with other black women and black men."<sup>269</sup>

Emerson's quote drives at the point of affirming the black female experience through cultural signifiers. Though I struggle with her example choice, which sees Badu's only temporary respite from a traditional role as mother and domestic servant, I agree with these assertions in

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<sup>268</sup> Big Freedia, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016.

<sup>269</sup> Emerson, "Where My Girls At?," 125.

relation to *Formation*. Freedia and Beyoncé both express their ability and intentions to "slay" in the track. They stand as independent and autonomous figures, as Emerson suggests, but through their collaboration, further reflect partnership and sisterhood of black women.

The act of identifying Freedia also creates an element of being "in" on a secret, which further strengthens the subcultural alliances developed throughout the video. In the bevy of articles from popular music websites such as Pitchfork.com or Vice Media's music-focused site, Noisey.com, both of which focus on underground artists, there was no shortage of acclaim for Beyoncé's inclusion of the artists, or their performances; nor was there ambiguity about their identities. This is to say, despite being absent from the video, there was no absence of credit for the work. Furthermore, when the visual album for *Lemonade* was released, other collaborators such as Jack White, The Weeknd, and Kendrick Lamar—male artists of considerably higher profiles than Mya and Freedia, which may have contributed to increased attention to the record—were also absent from the videos for their respective tracks. Lastly, when asked whether Big Freedia was approached about being in the *Formation* video, Freedia's manager, Reid Martin, responded via email that, "Beyoncé asked Freedia to participate on the track only a couple days before it was released. Unfortunately, there was no time for Freedia to be included in the actual video."<sup>270</sup> Due to the short time span between completion and release of the song, it would seem that Freedia's vocal was most likely conceived of as an addition to the track as the video was in the latter stages of editing, ultimately making her absence a logistical consequence, rather than tactical decision. In Mya's case, it is arguable that his inclusion would have given a morbid tone to the work, and compromised themes of survival and regeneration. These themes are reflected in the video's later scenes of parades, of second line dancing in rehabilitated New Orleans, and of Beyoncé's daughter at age 4, happily playing games with other children.

The intention Beyoncé sets through the inclusion of Mya's question, however, is to probe injustice. Regardless of whether you are Messy Mya or Beyoncé Knowles, you can demand answers. Beyoncé proceeds to establish a line of interrogation into the prejudicial injustices exposed through *Formation*'s visual allusions to Hurricane Katrina, and the city of New

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<sup>270</sup> Reid Martin, e-mail message to author, April 14, 2016.



Orleans. The initial shots of the video contrast flashing lights of a police vehicle with flashing lights worn as a decorative mouth piece by a young black male at a party. The back of a black, shirtless man dancing with his hands pressed behind him in a prayer pose is shown before the back of a jacket reading “POLICE.” A scene showing black teens dancing in a living room is intercut with shots of more flooded homes, New Orleans freeway underpasses, and a minister at a pulpit giving a confrontational look into the camera. It is of note that these, and several other background images of New Orleans were taken from Abteen Beghari’s 2013 documentary, *That B.E.A.T.*. Despite covering the New Orleans Bounce genre as a whole, it is comprised largely of footage featuring young, gay, black men dancing to a genre dubbed in the film, “Sissy Bounce,” for its queer contingent. The dance halls in which they compete are reminiscent of those featured in Jennie Livingston’s film, *Paris is Burning* (1990)— minimal, multi-use performance spaces with the kind of outdated interiors that speak to a scant operational budget of its owner, those that rent it, or both. Over the course of these first few clips of *Formation* (several of which are taken from a decidedly queer documentary of black artists), tensions are established between authorities and young black (queer) civilians, between the identities we can adopt in private, and those we must adopt in public to avoid the threat of punishment, or even death, and between poor black communities, and the America that would watch them drown in their own flooded waters. By bringing these tensions to light, Beyoncé also calls for their resolution. Her subsequent performances of black feminist identities defy the forces that would seek to ignore, or harm such subjects.

Before proceeding to explore this strategy, it is worth considering that, while it is precisely her success which makes Beyoncé a valuable figure to bring attention to these tensions, it could also be argued that her extreme wealth and status compromises her ability—perhaps even her right—to represent subjugated black subjects such as those she exposes, and entrenches herself amongst in scenes of New Orleans. This conflict is explored in Craig Owens’ work, “The Indignity of Speaking for Others” (1983). In this essay, Owens recalls a passage in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where Karl Marx says of French peasants once portrayed by artist, Gustave Courbet that, “They cannot represent one

another, they must themselves be represented."<sup>271</sup> Owens proceeds to criticise Marx's own position as representative of a larger body in the following passage:

"[Marx]'s self-appointed task was to represent the interests of those whom he presumed to be incapable of representing themselves...Marx uncritically assumes the traditional role of politically motivated intellectual— or artist— in bourgeois society: he appropriates for himself the right to speak on behalf of others, setting himself up as their conscience— indeed as a consciousness itself. But in order to occupy this position, he must first deny them (self)-consciousness, the ability to represent themselves."<sup>272</sup>

Owens explores the marginalisation inherent in speaking for others, which he asserts presumes that others cannot speak for themselves. I would like to address two factors which seem to preclude Beyoncé from occupying this position of condescension in this particular video. Beyoncé returns attention to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina eleven years after it occurred. By putting this event in conversation with the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, and thus comparable instances of systemic neglect of, and violence toward black subjects, Beyoncé does not suggest black subjects cannot speak for themselves, but rather that they have, and have not been heard. Beyoncé does not offer new language, or claim a position of authority, but rather calls for unity in the continued, collective protest of the injustices she uses her unique celebrity to draw attention to. Secondly, to critique Beyoncé, presumably for speaking for others, also denies, or questions her own agency to speak for herself—ironically flipping Owens' model. By accepting a degree of self-representation in Beyoncé's work, we might consider its value through another of Owens' critiques:

"In our culture there is, of course, no lack of representation of women— or, for that matter, of other marginalised groups (blacks, homosexuals, children, the insane...).

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<sup>271</sup> Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>272</sup> Craig Owens, "The Indignity of Speaking for Others," *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 261.

However, it is precisely in being represented by the dominant culture that these groups have been rendered absences within it."<sup>273</sup>

Owens first critiqued the idea of one person representing the collective conscience of others, by speaking for them, and here points out that it is the dominant culture which obscures marginalised groups despite the reality of their social ubiquity. Beyoncé defies the absence of black women in dominant culture, while also speaking as a successful black woman within that culture. She accomplishes this by infusing her images of female blackness with an honesty about her present status and lifestyle, while asserting lyrically that she is irrevocably of the culture whose lack of recognition she seeks to correct. This strategy threatens the white homogeneity of dominant culture through its internal penetration. She sings about her success as attainable, and deserved; identifies herself with various slang terms for people of color, and maintains a relatability through unpretentious cultural references to hot sauce, Red Lobster, and Cuervo tequila, among other examples.

By creating nine distinct personas throughout the video, she represents several gendered, black cultural territories that lie between the common, "Country," Southern culture Beyoncé Knowles asserts she comes from, having grown up in Houston, Texas; and the high, privileged society in which she finds herself as half of the billion-dollar empire she shares with her rap-mogul husband, Jay Z. Each character serves a specific purpose, while also expressing an overriding fluidity of identity through performance. Before we examine the symbolism of several of her figures, however, I would like to consider how the portrayal of these various roles fits within an ontological multiplicity explored in discourse on black subjectivity. Bringing these discourses into view further highlights the subversion of class and gender in Beyoncé's performative strategy.

I would like to return to DuBois' idea of double consciousness, discussed in relation to Zebra Katz. How might double-consciousness—seeing, and implicitly, judging one's self through the eyes of another—be experienced between black subjects of unequal social standing?

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 262.

While Beyoncé's performance in *Formation* elevates common southern black culture by way of her celebrity, it is also worth noting the irony of preserving and performing these elements of her cultural identity, which, as part of her promotional economy, maintain her current, privileged status, and thus the divide between herself and the majority of her fan base. This could, in fact, be said of any successful promotional album cycle, however, this is particularly pertinent given the level of success of the *Lemonade* album,<sup>274</sup> and how distant Beyoncé's upper class reality must be from that of the disenfranchised communities documented in the *Formation* video. Beyoncé's double consciousness manifests as a splintered self which must acknowledge her high cultural reality in the video through designer dresses and custom cars, while exploiting her pre-fame self—a self arguably, already sacrificed in pursuit of higher social status historically aligned with white culture. Though we will further consider assimilation to the white standard of the commercial music industry later in this chapter, this factor would only seem to fortify the video's moments of defiant glorification of feminine blackness, as anti-assimilation. Furthermore, we might consider how this kind of co-dependent sense of self achieved through the relationship of race and class is complicated by sex.

In her observation of black female authors, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson writes:

"Black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. Black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses."<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Keith Caulfield, "Beyoncé Scores Her Sixth Million-Selling Album in U.S. With *Lemonade*," *Billboard*, June 8, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7400402/beyonce-lemonade-sixth-million-selling-album>.

<sup>275</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, *Speaking in Tongues & Dancing Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62.

While Du Bois identified the role of the white Other in constructing black (male) subjectivity, Henderson notes this continual struggle among black female authors to identify themselves through a more complex navigation of dominant racial and sexual hierarchies. She calls this ability to change one's voice, or discourse depending on who is being spoken to, "multivocality." Beyoncé employs Henderson's model through her proliferation of identities, speaking as, and to, various subjects. Moreover, the queer and feminist figures she introduces to this landscape further compound the points of identification to, and from which subjects communicate. Whereas Beyoncé may at times be speaking as a woman, to women, or as a black woman, to black women, Big Freedia's multivocalities extend to trans women, queer women, queer men. In the character analyses below we will observe the identities Beyoncé performs, the nuance of their individual signification, and how, despite speaking in a myriad of tongues, *Formation* culminates in a message and performance of solidarity.

#### The Flood

In her first role, Beyoncé wears a simple red housedress. Her hair is pulled back, but frizzes around her face. She wears no makeup. Her seemingly domestic femininity is subverted through the dress' pairing with masculine combat boots, her low, nearly-spoken delivery of the first lines of the song, and her authoritative stance atop a New Orleans police cruiser, which slowly sinks into flooded waters beneath her. Though we will explore Brecht's Distancing Effect in greater detail later in the chapter, this tableau exemplifies a facet of this strategy in Brecht's Epic Theatre explored in the following passage:

"In this epic theatre serving non-Aristotelean type of drama the actor will at the same time do all he can to make himself observed standing between the spectator and the event. This making-oneself-observed also contributes to the desired indirect impact."<sup>276</sup>

The "non-Aristotelean" drama Brecht refers to is drama without empathy for the character. In this scene, Beyoncé stands, as Brecht suggests, "between the spectator and event." She does

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<sup>276</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 58.

not dramatise a role as a victim of Hurricane Katrina, but instead incorporates it as her backdrop to familiarise her audience with the themes pursued in the video.

Though seemingly plain, her ensemble also reveals her class: her dress and boots are designed by high-fashion labels, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton, respectively. The languid comfort of her poses read as dismissive to the “haters” she addresses, and insults as “corny” in her first line of the song. She then tells the paparazzi to, “catch [her] fly and [her] cocky fresh.”<sup>277</sup> Despite referencing the paparazzi in designer clothes, while also lowering into the water, she remains unaffected, casual, and invokes her blackness through street slang and envelopment in post-Katrina aftermath [Figure 49].



Figure 49: Beyoncé, *Formation*, 2016

With this image Beyoncé occupies high and low roles: that of the black domestic female subject whose slang aligns her with urban street culture, and the rich, fashionable icon who could sink white authority under the weight of her feminine blackness.<sup>278</sup> As these previous sections have established, Beyoncé must constantly address her reality and her past to convey believable representations of her black experience. However, her simultaneous occupation of these high and low roles also makes a progressive subversion to a dichotomy proposed by

<sup>277</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016.

<sup>278</sup> Naila Keleta-Mae, "Get What's Mine: 'Formation' Changes the Way We Listen to Beyonce Forever," *Noisey*, February 8, 2016, [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/beyonce-formation-op-ed-super-bowl-performance-2016](https://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/article/beyonce-formation-op-ed-super-bowl-performance-2016)

sociologist Elijah Anderson in his book *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and Moral Life of the Inner City* (1999):

"The inclination to violence springs from circumstances of life among the ghetto poor...Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk for falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community that can counteract the negative influences—by far the most powerful is a strong, loving, "decent" (as inner city residents put it) family that is committed to middle class values—the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of, "the street," whose norms are often consciously opposed to mainstream society."<sup>279</sup>

Anderson introduces us to "street" and "decent" black communities—a veritable good vs. evil, where the latter's contract with familial value structures may prevent the "conscious opposition" that Anderson has anchored to the violence of the former. It should be noted that Anderson views Respect as the foundational principle around which black identities develop, specifically in low-income, urban cities and suburbs, such as the areas in which *Formation* takes place. He maintains that, "At the heart of the code [of the street] is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated "right" or being granted one's "props" (or proper due) or the deference one deserves."<sup>280</sup> If respect cannot be maintained through decency, Anderson asserts that it must be achieved at street level. In addition to identifying The Family as the key to maintaining decency, Anderson cites the reason for descent to the violence of "street" life in the following passage:

"The hard reality of the world of the street can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the street is actually a cultural

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<sup>279</sup> Elijah Anderson, *Code of the street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999), 32.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system—and in others who would champion one's personal security."<sup>281</sup>

In *Formation*, Beyoncé collapses the boundary between "street" and "decent" culture, entangling her work in the above dialogue in several ways. In one of the latter scenes of the video, a young black boy dances in front of a long row of riot police. They eventually raise their hands, symbolizing the "Hands up. Don't shoot." slogan associated with the shooting of Michael Brown. The camera proceeds to pan across a wall spray painted with the words, "Stop shooting us." By invoking imagery reflective of Black Lives Matter Beyoncé reinforces Anderson's assertions about a lack of faith in public authorities. In this regard she aligns herself with the street, though her simultaneous role as successful, decent, pop star proves that violence is not necessary to gain, or demand respect.

Contrary to Anderson's valuation of respect, queer feminist scholar, Cathy Cohen observes respectability differently—as a way of assimilating to the very culture which marginalised people of color, and thus compromising to the politics of black deviance she promotes in her text "Deviance as Resistance" (2004). While it cannot be said that Beyoncé fully subverts or denies the relationship Anderson draws between decency and family—her husband and child feature in much of her work, including *Formation*—her specific handling of relationships, and her sexuality further aligns her with the anti-assimilation deviance promoted by Cohen. As a means of establishing her thesis, Cohen uses the following account from historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham about black women's involvement and leadership in the Baptist church in the early twentieth century:

"While adherence to respectability enabled Black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive contestation was not directed solely at White Americans; the black Baptist women condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 34.



attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon Blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals."<sup>282</sup>

What Cohen identifies through Higginbotham's account is a politics of assimilation, where respect is contingent upon playing to the codes of one's oppressors. As such, she advises a politics of deviance:

"In spite of the insights to be gained from a project of inclusion, the approach to queering African American Studies that I advocate is one based in an expansive understanding of who and what is queer and is, therefore, rooted in ideas such as deviance and agency and not exception and inclusion."<sup>283</sup>

Cohen advises against a politics of inclusion. Rather, hers is a politics of celebrating and politicising difference. Beyoncé exemplifies this through her creation of specifically black space throughout *Formation*. She also promotes alternative bonds outside of the nuclear family structure that she suggests people (specifically women) must activate, and lyrically combats a heteronormative relationship model, further reflective of deviant queer tones of the work.

#### The Widow

These particular elements of Beyoncé's performance are largely manifested in a character that is widow-like, dressed in all black, with her neck, chest, wrists and fingers completely covered in diamond jewelry. She stands in front of a Southern Gothic mansion flanked by men who appear to be the formally dressed staff of the home. When the character is shown throughout the video, she nods cryptically to the beat of the music, which swells and recedes throughout. Her brimmed hat sits low on her face, covering her eyes. She looks both mysteriously domineering and mournful. Beyoncé asserts the character's deviance and

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<sup>282</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

<sup>283</sup> Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review* Volume 1, Issue 1. (2004): 2.

"street" identity despite her extravagant house and clothes when she sings, "When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster."<sup>284</sup> It is this proceeding lyrical section that destabilises Beyoncé adherence to the model of decency-determining-family that Anderson promotes:

"When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay  
 When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay  
 If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, cause I slay  
 Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, cause I slay  
 I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay  
 I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay  
 You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, cause I slay  
 I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making"<sup>285</sup>

There are two ways of reading this verse: that she is speaking about her husband, or about a lover. Nuanced meaning is created from each version, though both posit her as the authoritative figure in the relationship, thus subverting normative gender roles, and heteronormative relationships. If the character she speaks about is a lover outside her marriage it subverts traditional monogamy. Despite this, she reinforces her role as wife and mother at other parts of the song,<sup>286</sup> essentially highlighting the sexual necessity for her deviance rather than a dissatisfaction with her husband or child. The privilege given to her sexual satisfaction opposes the classical expectation of demure femininity—especially in the South, where Beyoncé has laid her scene, and where, historical archetypes such as "The Southern Belle" have dictated particularly rigid and limited gender identities.

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<sup>284</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Beyoncé reinforces her role as the wife of Jay Z in the lyric, "I'm so possessive, so I rock his 'Roc' necklaces." A double entendre, she is referencing both diamonds (rocks) and Jay Z's management company, Roc Nation. She suggests that by wearing a branded necklace that she exercises her possession over him. Her role as mother is highlighted by the inclusion of her daughter in the video, and through the lyric "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros."

This passage perpetually highlights her deviance as a dominant black female. Appropriating a kind of "Sugar Daddy" role, she also rewards her lover when he satisfies her sexually with "street" gifts such as Red Lobster dinners and "Js" (Air Jordan Nike sneakers), as well as experiences reflective of her earned decency, such as rides in her helicopter. The line, "I might get your song played on the radio station" suggests that she might use her power to build a man's career, or, that she holds the power to her husband's continued success. She "might" get his song played on the radio—her delivery suggests it depends on her level of satisfaction with her partner. She then suggests that "[he] just might be a black Bill Gates in the making." She re-considers, and reminds us of her position of power: "I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making."

At one point the character holds two red, manicured middle fingers up to the camera [Figure 50]. The subversive marriage of street crassness with femininity expresses a total, and unaffected lack of caring. The moment signifies just how indifferent the character is to any judgement that good fucking and cheap seafood are not sources of pleasure, ones commensurate with her status, or what is expected to satisfy a woman of her apparent class.



Figure 50: Beyoncé, *Formation*, 2016

Beyoncé lifts the brim of her hat for the last line of the song, finally making eye contact with the camera as she asserts, "You know you that Bitch when you cause all that conversation."

Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper.”<sup>287</sup> Beyoncé is acknowledging that provoking dialogue makes her powerful. By referencing herself as a "bitch," she re-appropriates the misogynist term as expression of strength. Her gritty language preserves her "street" self in the still-decent landscape where she wears diamonds and couture gowns, but stays gracious in spite of her self-made "paper" fortune. Her confidence is mirrored by a laziness to her delivery in the verses, and an intense emphasis in the choral refrain. Meanwhile, her deviance is played through ambiguous sexual relationships marked by female authority.

### The Street

In two additional scenes, Beyoncé costumes herself in more casual "street" dress, but retains a glamourisation consistent with her other characters; again bridging the separation of high and low culture. She also positions herself literally, in the street—an unpretentious public environment. In one shot she appears hanging out of the passenger-side window of a "lowrider" style El Camino car. Her hair is braided in cornrows—a quintessentially black hair style. The car circles around an abandoned parking lot while Beyoncé leans out the window, drawing our focus to her hair and a sense of freedom expressed by her outstretched arms, and closed eyes [Figure 51]. In the second of her street scenes, she is accompanied by several female backup dancers of color. They wear casual, but sexy denim outfits, dancing in unison, physically enacting Beyoncé's choral refrain: "Ok ladies, now let's get in formation." The call for togetherness doubles as a call to get "information." She invites others, specifically "Ladies," implicitly, black ladies, to organise, and join her.

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<sup>287</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016



Figure 51: Beyoncé, *Formation*, 2016

In addition to her elevation of southern black street culture through its visual glamourisation, this feminisation of that culture is also of note. In her book, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005), author Patricia Hill Collins explores the role of gender in perpetuating the separation of Anderson's "street" and "decent" communities:

"Gender matters in this working-class variation of the tension between Black respectability and Black authenticity, between being "decent" and "street." The growth of prison culture in the 1980s greatly influenced African American social organisation, especially for young African American men. In particular, the arrest and imprisonment of black street gangs in the 1970s and 1980s fostered more pronounced and organised gang structures within prisons that became conduits for hierarchies of masculinity. The valorisation of thug life within black youth culture, the growing misogyny within heterosexual love relationships, and the increased visibility of homophobic violence targeted to gay, lesbian, and bisexual African Americans all seem to be casualties of the incarceration of African American men and the ceaseless need to prove one's manhood."<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81.

This passage comes within a broader discussion specifically about the incarceration of black fathers. Hill Collins exposes a relationship between the familial breakdown that would lead black youth to street life, and a re-cultivation of fraternity and belonging through gangs and prisons. She maintains that violence, misogyny, and homophobia falsely reinforce a masculinity absent or undefined at home. This cycle both relies on, and perpetuates gender codes to a debilitating degree. Alongside her backup dancers, Beyoncé forms a non-violent "gang" of women who peacefully occupy street space, historically perceived as masculine and potentially violent. The image also subverts the historical alignment of women in the street with prostitution. In her essay, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique" (1991), Angela McRobbie identifies this tactic in Pat Benatar's *Love is a Battlefield* (1983) video, which pictures similar female dance sequences in urban street space. McRobbie reminds us that, "the street remains in some ways taboo for women (think of the unambiguous connotations of the term street walker)."<sup>289</sup> Significant to this discourse is the consideration that, disappointingly, since McRobbie's writing in 1983, the stigma she explores has remained fairly unchanged. Beyoncé appropriative strategies are still those of Benatar's.

While Anderson asserts that heterosexual partnerships are key to producing decent black subjects, Hill Collins exposes how the breakdown of heteronormative structures in vulnerable communities negatively manifests security and belonging in gangs and prisons. Hill Collins' observations partially serve Anderson's thesis, though they might also suggest that cultivating deviant modes of family, or supportive bonds destabilise the norms perpetuating these systems of violence. Cohen echoes this with a direct critique of Anderson's research in the following passage:

"In defense of [Anderson] and other similar texts, the fundamental objective of such studies, I believe, is to describe the contours of Black communities and to mount a rigorous examination of the systemic discrimination experienced by these subjects.

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<sup>289</sup> Angela McRobbie "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," in *Feminism and Youth Culture*, " Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1991), 39.

However, far too often, as the researcher works to differentiate the lived conditions of segments of Black communities, internalised normative judgments about the proper and natural structure of family, intimate relationships and forms of social interaction creep into the analysis and prescriptions about what must be done. It is here, under the guise of objectively studying Black communities that the assumed importance of the nuclear family, appropriate gender relations, and the efficiency of the capitalist system imposes an understanding of difference that results in the pathologizing of all those who would choose differently on such fundamental and often assumed truths."<sup>290</sup>

While this passage may not seek to entirely dispel the connection between a vulnerable family structure, and one's compromised future, it negates the pathologisation of alternative family structures. Cohen's critique of Anderson proposes alternative structures of family and intimacy that may be as beneficial as normative structures have been historically perceived to be. In a similar vein, *Formation* makes no reference to women needing men to build partnerships, but considers in its lyrics, and dramatises in the video, the power of black women uniting as a system of support, and source of knowledge.

#### The Belle

The last of the video's identities I wish to address exposes how Beyoncé manipulates temporality to subversive effect. As with the visual and lyrical pairing mentioned earlier, where chain restaurants and chopper helicopters exist in the same reality as a woman seemingly depicted from the historic South, Beyoncé makes constant visual reference to the past, and to *her* past. She marries her "street" and "decent" selves so seamlessly and completely as to address this spectrum across temporalities, as if imagining, not only how things should be for women of color, but how they always should have been.

In stark contrast to the confrontational character in all black, Beyoncé plays two Antebellum-style Southern belles in all white. One twirls a parasol in a high-collar white blouse and

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<sup>290</sup> Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance," 5.

corset. The other is surrounded by a bevy of black women who fan themselves in long formal dresses [Figure 52]. She configures a history suggested by the classical portraits of black women hung behind the group. She both legitimises her move away from the street by suggesting through vintage-styled scenes of privilege that people of color never should have been degraded to the level that they were, but reinforces through her lyrics that despite this move, her blackness and background maintain an authenticity reflective of black experience.



Figure 52: Beyoncé, *Formation*, 2016

Over these scenes, she sings:

"My daddy Alabama, my momma Louisiana  
 You mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texas Bama  
 I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros  
 I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils  
 Earned all that money, but they never take the country out' me.  
 I got hot sauce in my bag. Swag."<sup>291</sup>

This section takes an explicit ownership of black physicality. Beyoncé refers to herself as a "Bama"—a derogatory Southern slang term for a black person. At another point in the song she self-references as a "Yellow-bone," another slur for light-skinned black women. She

<sup>291</sup> Beyoncé, "Formation," *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, Musical Recording, 2016



expresses pride in natural, unaltered blackness: "Jackson Five" (rather than Michael Jackson) nostrils, and the natural afro hairstyle worn by her daughter in the video. It is this particular passage which makes this pop song operate differently than most because it demands that we question who it is for, and perhaps take the liberty of saying that it is not for some audiences.

### Ownership

In the days following the release of *Formation* this topic of ownership was explored across dozens of popular online platforms. I would like to explore three such texts as artefacts of black female fandom rather than academic discourse, though it is of note that I would be reluctant to include these texts were their authors not also established scholars. Allison P. Davis wrote for *New York Magazine*:

"I'm coming down firmly on the side that says this song is not for everyone.

Let me be clear: It is for everyone to download, listen to, think about, learn from, and discuss. But it is not for everyone to take ownership over: This song, and its message, belongs to black people. And everyone needs to be okay with the fact that some moments in pop culture mean more to one group of people than to others.

"Formation," with its rare message of unabashed black female pride, is one of those moments."<sup>292</sup>

What I read from the particular fierceness of this declaration is that, as a black woman, the author feels that *Formation* is part hers—that a fear of misinterpretation or appropriation has inspired her particularly protective tone. She not only takes ownership, but suggests that ownership be denied to non-Black audiences, who instead are meant to, "download, listen, think, learn from, and discuss" the song, but not sing along to, or self-reflect in it. University of Waterloo professor, Naila Keleta-Mae, who teaches an entire course dedicated to the subject of Beyoncé, explained in her article for music site, Noisey:

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<sup>292</sup> Allison P. Davis, "Why Are White People Trying to Ruin 'Formation'?", *New York Magazine, The Cut*, February 26, 2016, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/02/why-are-white-people-trying-to-ruin-formation.html>.

*Formation* is a notably complex meditation on female blackness, the United States of America, and Capitalism. And the blackness that this song and video articulates is not some kind of abstract, cool, costume that can be put on and taken off at will. This female blackness is specific. It's 26 brown-skinned black women of multiple shades and shapes dancing in step. It's dark basements and large mirrors where queer black male hips twerk and revel. It's sun aversion, high collared dresses, corsets, and spread thighs. It's Messy Mya's voice from the grave asking what happened to New Orleans. It's black women's braless breasts bouncing in hallways lined with bookshelves and brocade. It's homes underwater because 11 years ago Hurricane Katrina broadcasted to the world that systemic and institutionalised anti-black racism was still state-sanctioned and real. *Formation* is Big Freedia, the queen of bounce music, announcing on behalf of Beyoncé and herself that, "I did not come to play with you hoes / I came to slay, bitch." It's Gucci Spring '16, Chanel pre-fall, vintage, and custom clothing... In "Formation," black women's bodies are literally choreographed into lines and borders that permit them to physically be both inside and outside of a multitude of vantage points. And what that choreography reveals is the embodiment of a particular kind of 21st Century black feminist freedom in the United States of America; one that is ambitious, spiritual, decisive, sexual, Capitalist, loving, and communal."<sup>293</sup>

Keleta-Mae does not go as far as Davis' suggestion that the song is specifically not for all audiences, but proudly catalogues the moments that are emblematic of black culture throughout the video. Also of note is how she authenticates Beyoncé's blackness by maintaining that these elements are not "costumes" one can take off. Rather, she suggests that the specificity of the images makes them intimate reflections of the black experience, each with long-standing histories, perhaps only legible to black audiences. Though Keleta-Mae's analysis reinforces many of my own assertions about *Formation's* merits, I believe it is precisely the performance—the carefully chosen costumes Beyoncé dons in order to create personas, and how she employs those characters in fortified roles—that solidifies the power

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<sup>293</sup> Keleta-Mae, "Get What's Mine"

of these black, queer, and feminist representations. These tokens of blackness existed, and were legible before Beyoncé incorporated them into the video, though perhaps it is precisely because she incorporates them that they are validated, glamourised, and enough—there is no need to pander to white culture that may not identify with these images. I highlight this distinction, not to undermine these tokens of blackness as lacking value in their own right, but rather to return to the idea of finding agency in performance. Just as gender can be performed in endless ways, as we explored in the first chapter, *Formation* exemplifies how blackness may be performed to queer and feminist effect. Lastly, in her blog, *New South Negress*, Dr. Zandria Robinson offered the following analysis of the video:

"Beyoncé places her own reckless, country blackness—one of afros, cornrows, and negro noses, brown liquor and brown girls, hot sauce, and of brown boys and cheddar bay biscuits—in conversation with, and as descended from, a broader southern blackness that is frequently obscured and unseen in national discourses, save for as (dying, lynched, grotesque, excessive) spectacle. *Formation*, then, is a metaphor—a black feminist, black queer, and black queer feminist theory of community organizing and resistance. To slay the violence of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, we must start, Beyoncé argues, with the proper formation. The proper formation is, she contends, made possible by the participation and leadership of a blackness on the margins."<sup>294</sup>

I assert that part of the inclination of black audiences to identify with *Formation* is its exclusion of what Robinson calls the 'spectacle' of dying, lynched, grotesque black bodies; in other words: victims. Beyoncé calls attention to the victimhood of New Orleans through her allusions to Hurricane Katrina, but the fortified and fearless bodies on view oppose the sentimental images typically scrolled across television news casts and national papers meant to elicit sympathy and grief. By including these texts I am hoping to draw an attention to the revelatory and celebratory tones reflected through the relationship made to this work by

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<sup>294</sup> Dr. Zandria Robinson, "We Slay, Pat I," *New South Negress*, February 7, 2016, <http://newsouthnegress.com/southernslayings/>.

female black audiences. Those tones, moreover, are manifested into the kind of provocative black female discourse necessary to combat the same homogenous white patriarchy that, as Robinson asserts, Beyoncé's radical art, and those that feel positively represented by it, could aid in dismantling.

In contrast to these exuberant reviews by black female fans who double as accredited scholars and authors, however, are severe criticisms from black feminist scholar, bell hooks. In the following passage, hooks critiques *Lemonade*, the visual album on which "Formation" appears, and which shares many of the same cultural references and aesthetics as the *Formation* video:

"Viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé's audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color."<sup>295</sup>

hooks dismisses the issue of ownership through her leveling classification of the work as commodity: anyone may buy in. However, she continues:

"What makes this production—this commodity—daring is its subject matter. Obviously *Lemonade* positively exploits images of black female bodies—placing them at the center, making them the norm. In this visual narrative, there are diverse representations (black female bodies come in all sizes, shapes, and textures with all manner of big hair)... *Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza—a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold. What makes this commodification different in *Lemonade* is intent; its purpose is to

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<sup>295</sup>bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," *bell hooks institute*, May 9, 2016, <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>

seduce, celebrate, and delight—to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanisation of the black female body. Throughout *Lemonade* the black female body is utterly-aestheticised—its beauty a powerful in your face confrontation.

It is the broad scope of *Lemonade*'s visual landscape that makes it so distinctive—the construction of a powerfully symbolic black female sisterhood that resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent. This in and of itself is no small feat—it shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture. It challenges us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see the black female body. However, this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity."<sup>296</sup>

hooks' passages above do not reach the kind of (victorious, jubilant) resolve offered by Davis, Keleta-Mae, or Robinson. She fairly re-interprets aesthetics as marketing strategy; she reminds us there's a bottom line. But, she also acknowledges the power of the work for how it abides by a radically different sexual and racial hierarchy: "a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries." I find it difficult to reconcile this praise against her critique that the bodies used to populate this proposed world are mere commodity. Does she suggest that these women are for sale, or simply that their value is used to market the album? The lack of clarification reads fairly irresponsibly. Beyoncé is not for sale, nor are the women employed for their artistry and craft in *Formation*, or throughout *Lemonade*. *Lemonade* is for sale, but hooks' argument that black female bodies are used to market the album is predicated on their perceived value, which, significantly not all audiences might ascribe to such women, or these particularly fortified representations of them. hooks fails to interrogate the effect of *Lemonade* on such an audience.

Another facet to the discussion of the song's themes of black pride and ownership were assertions that "Formation" alienated white audiences. Though a colloquial example, this was explored by American sketch comedy show, *Saturday Night Live* in a clip that went viral online, and arguably reflected the veritable phenomenon that the debate turned into. In the

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

clip, hysteria breaks out among white subjects who, after the release of *Formation* realise for the first time that Beyoncé is black. The revelation is in fact portrayed as apocalyptic: traffic piles up as screaming drivers exit their vehicles to run, or pray in the street, while office workers hide under their desks following a power outage. In a state of bewilderment, a white male character hesitantly suggests, "Maybe this song isn't for us." A white female co-worker replies in shock, "But usually everything is." Though the clip is meant as trivial TV satire, it addresses a systemic white privilege and entitlement that spans into realms as seemingly apolitical as dance music. The fact that the subject could be satirised in such a way, let alone achieve viral circulation stands to suggest that a significant number of people would get the joke, ie: relate. The identity politics brought to the fore are further complicated when a man asks, 'How can she be black? She's a woman.' To this a colleague responds in horror, "I think she might be both." The subtext here is that black women do not exist—they are not visible, they do not matter, they are not Beyoncé. If, as the sketch suggests, Beyoncé's blackness is a revelation to her white audience, *Formation* is not just of note for its feminist performance of blackness, but Beyoncé's refusal to play or present as white—something Beyoncé has been both accused of, and conjectured to have been made a victim of by media who control her image. For example, in 2008, Beyoncé appeared in an advertising campaign for L'Oreal hair dye, in which her skin seemed noticeably light. In revised edition of her book, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium* (2013), author, Kathy Russell-Cole explains:

"The cosmetic giant denied that it had lightened Beyoncé's skin, but it was obvious that somebody had. Of further annoyance was the fact that Beyoncé's long hair was "photoshopped" to look perfectly straight and dark blond—in other words to make her look more racially ambiguous and mainstream"<sup>297</sup>

In this instance, Russell-Cole exposes an inherent racism of the fashion and beauty industry through her assertion that Beyoncé's identity was essentially compromised through the

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<sup>297</sup> Kathy Russell-Cole, et al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, Second edition (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 230.

lightening of her skin. Scholars such as Kevin Allred and Madison Moore, however, identify her racial representation as a kind of tool at her disposal. Allred explains:

"A good deal of Beyoncé's sex appeal has to do with her lighter skin tone and the way it gets played with. I think that her lighter skin is definitely a factor in terms of appealing to a wide audience."<sup>298</sup>

Allred sees her lighter skin as an advantage for appealing to white audiences, and notes that it is "played with," perhaps referring to the incident with L'Oreal, or similar liberties taken through the mediatisation of her body as product. In the following passage, Madison Moore explores similar fluidity with regard to her identity:

"Beyoncé, who is black/creole but light enough to pass as Latina when excellent airbrushing is used, makes her body and skin play the role of the sultry, mixed race jezebel whose primary role is to be a seductress."<sup>299</sup>

Moore echoes Allred's reading of Beyoncé's skin as "played with" through his allusion to her being able to present as Latina, which she is not. As a parallel to Allred's assertion that her light skin allows her to appeal to a white audience, Moore hints that she is able to appear sultry and seductive by performing her blackness to greater extent when so desired.

I have made this detour in discussion of Beyoncé's skin tone to consider what saying that a track alienates a white audience further suggests: that music must therefore cater to white audiences. The examples we have explored above only further reinforce this idea that artists' blackness must not be spoken of, or physically too apparent, lest white audiences are no longer able to align themselves with the artists and their work. In his book, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997), Richard Dyer explains that, "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial expression is of a piece with its ubiquity."<sup>300</sup> Dyer handles whiteness as the norm that

<sup>298</sup> Madison Moore, "Kevin Allred Interview," in *How to be Beyoncé*, (Williamsburg: Thought Catalog, 2013), 35.

<sup>299</sup> Madison Moore, *How to be Beyoncé*, 33.

<sup>300</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

is ironically invisible. He contends that as it remains invisible, it also remains the norm. *Formation* highlights Dyer's thesis. By making a video whose representations operate outside the norm, it highlights what exactly that norm is: the invisible whiteness that must not be mentioned, but is nevertheless catered to as standard. Through its prideful enunciations of black physicality, *Formation* brings that seldomly-felt discomfort and disorientation of a white audience's inability to self-identify to the fore. However, I argue that *Formation* is not meant to alienate in a true sense—to repel its white viewers— but rather to engage them intellectually with the social problems it potently dramatises. This is perhaps best highlighted by reading *Formation* through Bertolt Brecht's fittingly titled Alienation Theory or Distancing effect.

#### Distancing

As we explored in the introduction, Brecht's theater is one that caters to rationale. Unlike traditional theater, or narrative film, Brecht's Epic Theater does not seek to immerse the audience in a fictional narrative in which they are meant to emotionally invest, or self-identify. Indeed, like *Formation*'s allusions to Hurricane Katrina, Brecht often emphasises the value of dramatising historical events, lending to specific and more objective narratives, rather than what he perceives as the falsity of "universal," "eternally human," themes, which purport to be natural in fictional scripts.<sup>301</sup> Brecht does not deny emotion caused by the Epic Theater entirely, but considers the emotional response one might have to revelations of modern science<sup>302</sup> as a comparable experience to the feelings produced by Epic Theater. He privileges sign and symbol over character, and denounces the illusion of theatrical space. By often speaking to the audience in direct address, Brecht's actors break the theoretical "fourth wall," separating them from the audience.

In the introduction, I outlined Brecht's "Distancing," or "Alienation" effect, which promoted the development of an audience's consciousness through an independence from empathy. He maintains that such empathy is typically experienced at a passive level, when we easily identify with some element of the performance or character, particularly when centered

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<sup>301</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 96.

<sup>302</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 23.



around one of the aforementioned 'universal themes,' such as love, death, fortune, or misfortune—a strategy Brecht discredits in a theatrical context. Brecht asserts that, "Theatrical forms correspond to particular trends of their time, and vanished with them. Similarly the modern epic theatre is linked with certain trends."<sup>303</sup> Though Brecht may not have envisioned his theory of Distancing being applied to the analysis of pop music video, this quote expresses that he did have the foresight to anticipate changing modes of performance, and how the Epic Theatre might be adapted to it.

In *Formation*, Beyoncé announces her blackness, lyrically and visually, in literal and symbolic ways. Through an unexpected inability to identify with the pop star, the white audience must be forced to acknowledge blackness and examine the systems which continually reproduce white narratives. In this regard, Beyoncé strategically creates consciousness through the distancing of her white audience by invoking Brecht's alienation effect.

Unlike Beyoncé videos such as *Irreplacable* (2007) and *Halo* (2008), which present us with fictional narratives through which we are encouraged to empathise and identify with Beyoncé's heartbreak and romance, respectively, *Formation* does not solicit empathy. While her characters in *Irreplacable* and *Halo* express, and elicit anger, longing, happiness, defeat, and arousal, for example, Beyoncé sings in direct address throughout *Formation*, maintaining an impenetrable façade of cool confidence. Rather than matching our emotions to those of Beyoncé's character narratives as we might have been encouraged to do in the aforementioned examples of past videos, with *Formation* we are forced to read the texts and signs she supplies to cull the meaning of her work. Those texts and signs hone in on specific black southern cultures, communities and bodies; also occasionally even depicting specific periods of time. The benefit of a failure of a white audience to identify with Beyoncé when, for example, she calls herself a "Texas 'Bama" or a "Black Bill Gates-in-the-making" who "likes [her] negro nose with 'Jackson 5' nostrils," is to consider the infrequency of black representation in popular media—let alone representation of successful black women who

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 76.

also exert ownership of their sexuality—or simply the ubiquity of white representation that falsely, silently is meant to represent the experience of all.

### Conclusion

As a point of entry, *Formation* zooms in on the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, only to extend its endemic implications through a myriad of performed identities and temporalities. We are returned to the antebellum south, where the delicacy of Beyoncé's southern belles is subverted by the invisible histories of chattel slavery that rise into our consciousness. We are interrogated by voices of the dead; and implored by the living: "Stop shooting us." The violence alluded to in the video as having been produced by systemic racism, from slavery, to Hurricane Katrina, to the murder of Trayvon Martin, is combatted with expressions of gendered blackness that resist the silencing and fear symptomatic of racism, sexism, and homophobia: sweaty queer men twerk in NOLA dance halls, a line of afroed women flex their muscles in custom Gucci dance uniforms, while refrains alternate between calling for female unity, and celebrating the physicality of blackness. Street authenticity and feminine glamour are traded equally in Beyoncé's representational economy, sanctioning the universal value of all black lives, regardless of status. In addition to exploring how these images' historical perspective suggest contemporary action, I have also considered how they evoke, challenge, or marry existing discourses in black studies. Exploring DuBois' theory of Double Consciousness has brought us to consider intra-racial class strata, and how Beyoncé manipulates her image to express her past and present. Perhaps most relevant to identifying the subversive power of performance in this video is Henderson's text on multi-vocality. Henderson highlights the precarity of various subjects within the singular black woman. This is shared in the work of Solange, Cakes da Killa, and Zebra Katz explored earlier in this chapter. Beyoncé relies on her performance to define how she speaks to, and as these various subjects. Beyoncé's black femininity abides by neither Anderson's 'code of the street,' nor is it entirely loyal to Hill Collins' project of deviance, though exploring both scholars' discourse on black subjectivity helps to frame Beyoncé's subversive project: a series of tableau fusing masculine, feminine, high, low, maternity, sexuality, unified strength and non-violent resistance. As evidenced by the various references to Black Lives Matter, it is of no

coincidence that Beyoncé chose this critical moment in which to make a video whose expression of blackness is entirely unmatched in her catalog. Though the videos we explored earlier in the chapter—Solange’s *Don’t Touch My Hair*, Cakes da Killa’s *Truth Tella*, and Zebra Katz’s videos, *I Bad Bitch*, and *Blk Diamond*—do not make explicit reference to the movement, these works’ queerness and feminism operates as inseparable from their blackness, affirming Black Lives Matter’s mission toward greater visibility and acceptance of female, trans, and queer black lives.

### Conclusion

The objects of study explored in this text utilise performance to subvert gender and sex in music video. This assessment relies on a foundation established in accordance with the work of Judith Butler, who maintains that gender is both a performance, and performative. She claims that we continually reproduce performances of gender according to the framework of a heterosexist, binary model of gender, but also that gender produces what it anticipates; it constitutes itself from the point that our genders are first decided. What this thesis proposes is that the power of performance to define and limit us, can also be utilised to undo those restrictions, and expose their construction. Importantly, when theorists such as bell hooks, discredit the representational economy of an artist such as Beyoncé for its standing within a commercial landscape, they deny the subversive potential of performance to re-inscribe the body, its signification, and ultimately its experience and power. Furthermore, when hooks labeled Beyoncé an “anti-feminist terrorist”<sup>304</sup> for her effect on young women during a panel discussion at the New School in New York City, she reproduces the very misogyny that she critiques Beyoncé for failing to adequately combat.

The misogynistic undertone of hooks’ inappropriate comparison of Beyoncé to a terrorist, is not the only problem with her critique. The online responses to *Lemonade* by women of color, who, importantly, are engaging with nuanced, and complex discourses of black, feminist, representation, representative of hooks’ own concerns, contradict hooks’ qualification of Beyoncé’s work as threatening, or worse, hollow, for its simultaneous standing as commodity. Furthermore, the argument neglects to recognise works such as *Lemonade*’s standing within an open digital commons. I do not deny that *Lemonade* is part of Beyoncé’s intensely lucrative enterprise, but rather that the access to it, and the ownership of it, are not precluded in the ways typical of other commodities. The benefits of the internet to music video have been seen in the perpetually experimental representations of gender afforded by the medium’s deregulation, and access to those images through the internet’s

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<sup>304</sup> Roxane Gay, “Beyoncé's control of her own image belies the bell hooks 'slave' critique,” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/12/beyonce-bell-hooks-slave-terrorist>.

veritable omnipresence. I return to a phrase of Richard Dyer, similarly held up by Railton in Watson: “cultural representations have real consequences for real people.”<sup>305</sup> The online discourse produced in response to *Lemonade* highlights its power, and the power of work like it, to offer a re-telling of what our bodies signify.

In this text, subversive performances of gender were observed in dialogue with queer, feminist, and dramatic theories to locate subversive agency, and cull the meaning of these works. This research has been guided by questions established in the introduction, which I will review in conclusion of this text: How is gender subverted in music video? How have methods of subversion changed in response to the cultural climates in which they were produced? I will now make a consolidated review of the specific, and numerous ways that gender has been subverted, and how subversive strategies have responded to shifting cultural conditions.

The work explored in the first chapter focuses largely on dismantling a sexual hierarchy through female sexual agency and alternative sexual practices during the AIDS crisis. The methods of gender subversion were explored as a reaction to increased censorship of the arts, sparked by reactionary conservatism. This period saw the establishment of music censorship programs, such as the PMRC (Parent Music Resource Center), and the decreased funding of arts organisations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts.

Videos by George Michael, TLC, and Salt-N-Pepa advocated for AIDS awareness, and the kind of sexual responsibility once obscured by norms that would police and shame queer and female sexuality. Brecht’s literising, and his advocacy of appealing to an audience’s rationale were identified as essential strategies in these works. In videos by Madonna and Nine Inch Nails, subcultural sex practices defy heteronormative standards. The morbid, and masochistic images of these videos further reflect the theatrical strategies of Dürrenmatt, whose Theatre of the Grotesque promoted the use of grotesque imagery in an attempt to mirror social problems, such as the AIDS crisis. Despite subversive content such as

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<sup>305</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

Madonna's *Erotica* (1992) and Nine Inch Nail's *Happiness in Slavery* (1992) being produced, these videos were banned, largely unseen until the internet afforded them greater circulation and visibility.

In chapter two I explored the strategy of proliferation in accordance with the theory of Judith Butler, who calls for a "radical proliferation of gender" to displace gender norms. The breadth of identities in this chapter challenge the established binary of gender; its system of norms, behaviors, and aesthetics. Juliana Huxtable's trans body, Lady Gaga's cyborg self, and Bjork's aquatic and technological posthuman characters are among the representations that confront, confuse, and politicise the gendered body in music video. It is precisely the ability to theatricalise bodies and genders, which has uniquely accommodated this proliferation; its extremity, and the exposure of the theatricality and constructed nature of existing norms.

The incomparable experimentation with gender representation in the last decade was explored alongside technological advancements, and shifting norms of sex and gender evidenced by same-sex marriage rights in the United States and the United Kingdom. These events suggest a reason why this proliferation has thrived. Perhaps most significant among these shifts was the introduction of YouTube, which offered increased access to music video, allowed for monetisation of the work through product placements and advertising revenue, and largely negated the need to adhere to previously enforced content regulations by television networks. I have observed a productive relationship between subversive content, and contemporary modes of distribution, regulation, and consumption. In addition to decreased regulation, which has afforded experimentation with subversive imagery, sites such as YouTube have also offered an open platform to present, and access independent artists' work. Throughout this chapter the subversive strategies of Artaud are observed as foundational to the extremity of these works.

The final chapter observes work by black artists since the inception of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012. As previously mentioned, it is not my intention to locate blackness as a source of subversion, but consider the specific modes of agency and critique employed by black artist toward queer and feminist ends. This chapter considers Brecht's alienation

theory, or distancing effect as a means of engaging audiences with Black Lives Matter, and the lack of black representation, and more specifically black female representation, in mainstream media.

By incorporating dramatic theory, this thesis frames gender performance as a source of agency; as a site where illusion can be deconstructed and exposed, and where an audience can be educated and affected rather than submissively entertained.

The inclination to deconstruct norms has also been shared by many of the queer, and feminist scholars explored in this text. It is through the exploration of the various actions and images which perform against the limits and expectations of gender that the performative effect of gender categories explored by Butler can begin to be undone. Perhaps it will be through our fusion with machines, as proposed by Haraway, or perhaps, by *going gaga* as Halberstam suggests.

I will say that this undoing is something that I have experienced. Through my practice, I have established my way of being girl and woman that feels powerful. Through my practice, I have tried to expand and threaten the established visual lexicon of gendered representations and their meanings. Importantly, these attempts would not have been made were I not educated by the likes of Madonna, Prince, Courtney Love, Janet Jackson, Marilyn Manson, and Karen O, that gender can be used against its own restrictions through performance.

And importantly, this project continues. Over the course of my research I often lamented feeling that questions, problems, or interpretations of gender may be exhausted. Tragically, the renewed conservatism expressed by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump has highlighted the need for continued discourse, and continued resistance. The visibility afforded by mainstream culture, makes music video an indispensable platform for feminism and queerness to act toward that resistance. Indeed, nearing the end of this dissertation is bittersweet, because music video continues to be a radically generative site. Gendered representations are increasingly experimental, as is the genre's intersectionality with other mediums.

Originally I planned to include a chapter that focused on music video's intersections with performance art, dance, and videos that included longer narrative sections, more suggestive of film. Ultimately, I chose to take a more concentrated approach to the topic of gender, and hope to examine these intersections of form more closely in future work. In anticipation of that next phase, I would like to mention some of the videos working at this intersection, that also handle gender in subversive ways. The video work of Dev Hynes, a queer, black artist, who performs as Blood Orange heavily incorporates contemporary dance. Other works that operate at an intersection with the performing arts and film include Madonna's video art and tour visual collaborations with Steven Klein; Sia's series of videos featuring the choreography of modern dancer, Maddie Zeigler, and her personal performance project of hiding her face while singing live; the collaborations of Anohni and Marina Abramovic, which were adapted for stage in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*, and included in Anohni's music video, *Cut the world* (2012); Jay Z's *Picasso Baby* (2012) video documented an 8-hour performance of the song in an art gallery, and featured appearance by Marina Abramovic, and Roselee Goldberg; and Bjork and Matthew Barney's video collaboration, *Drawing Restraint 9*, which Bjork provided the soundtrack for. More recently, Father John Misty released a 25-minute film to accompany his album, *Pure Comedy* (2017). Meant to act as a documentary of the making of the album, the footage is spliced with scenes of Los Angeles burning, in black and white film stock.

Perhaps a more precarious development in music video is an increase of corporate collaborations—an area of study that resonates with much of Vernallis' research. Concerned less with representation and performance, Vernallis is a communications and media scholar who has explored the fluidity and intersections of the music video format as art, advertisement, or homemade video in the wake of YouTube and other audience-curated websites. Despite these video's corporate partnerships, however, content would seem to go uncompromised in a new range of commercial work. Frank Ocean preceded the release of his album, *Blonde* (2016) with a visual album, *Endless* (2016) posted exclusively to Apple Music. *Endless* documents the meditative construction of a black staircase at the center of a white industrial warehouse, as Ocean periodically paces, and checks his phone. The work is aesthetically more comparable to an abstract short film than to a typical music video, and



suggests themes of confinement, boredom, and escape. FKA twigs debuted her new song “Trust in Me” (2017) as a Nike advertisement, where “The feminine” is largely re-defined. twigs dances with several other female dancers, whose highly conditioned forms exude strength and power. The costumes range from globular, posthuman eye coverings, and tribal face paint, to re-designed hijab veils stemming from Nike sports caps. twigs was also appointed creative director for Nike Women’s spring campaign. Even artists considered punk and indie have found room in the medium to collaborate with brands more reflective of their subversive ethos. Mykki Blanco recently teamed with pornography website, PornHub to produce the video, *Loner* (2016). Styled by Lady Gaga’s former stylist, Nichola Formichetti, the work features allusions to virtual and group sex, and has been one of the few videos to be banned by YouTube after being repeatedly flagged for explicit content by the site’s users. Christeene, a punk drag artist known for a grotesque aesthetic of matted, chopped hair, white contact lenses, and sloppy makeup, also recently released a video in collaboration with designer, Rick Owens—known for his designs and theatrical runway shows which subvert accepted gender norms—and his wife, and designer of Owens’ brand of furniture, Michele Lamy. In the video for *Butt Muscle* (2017), Christeene inserts Owens’ long, black hair into her anus, which is then shown exiting her mouth; she caresses Lamy’s naked, lubricated body, gives Owens a golden shower, and handles two long black dildos affixed to handles that appear like guns.

Since the launch of MTV in 1981 music videos have benefitted from technological advance, but have also defied strident censorship. As we enter a new phase of conservatism, subversive work remains a necessity. Through performance, identity is weaponised against its own restrictions. At the site of music video this is achieved through visual extremity, and on a scale that is unmatched.

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### Portfolio Statement

This portfolio is comprised of two video series, *Swallower* (2014), and *Roses* (2015), and three additional videos produced over 2016: *Dust I*, *Dust II*, and *Promises*. These works are the outcome of practical research developed toward this thesis. Though I explored my practical methodology in the introduction, I will elaborate on aspects of the research processes which are specific to each work, and those shared amongst the series.

Leading up to the filming of *Swallower* I was thinking a lot about weddings, funerals, and the gendered archetypes, such as brides, grooms, and widows, that “star” in such performative productions. I thought about the relationships that weddings and funerals solidify, expose, change, or deconstruct. From the interest in ritual came a broader curiosity of the gendering of spaces, environments, or “sets,” where rituals take place. The research questions of *Swallower* ask if bonding rituals can be adapted to non-sexual relationships to produce similarly aestheticised affirmations of queer and feminist gender identities. It also asks how subversive performances of gender might penetrate traditionally masculine and feminine spaces, i.e.: how the pairing of subject and their surroundings highlight a heteronormative framework of physical space.

The first obstacle was to find a location with traditionally presented masculine and feminine spaces in which to insert characters, or against which to present scenes. I found various wedding venues online, and wrote to their proprietors about filming there, and paying a reduced fee. *Swallower* was filmed at a large manor house, with sprawling gardens, near Penzance, England.

The polarity of the home’s décor was so strikingly organised by gendered aesthetics. One of the rooms we filmed in had a long wooden table, surrounded by walls of books, and photographs documenting the family’s riding legacy. The other was filled with plush, dark furnishings, old portraits, mounted taxidermy, and hunting and safari-themed art. The family had designated a bedroom for brides to prepare in when weddings were held there. It was a pink room with big windows, and lots of light. The bed had a dripping silk canopy over it,

suspended in a wood structure with floral carvings. There was a fainting couch, a vanity, and a large armoire, all of which were antique, and consistently feminine: curved, decorative, delicate, pastel. Even being at the property felt like a significant trespassing

The first scene we shot pairs two figures in front of the house: a cisgender male in a black widow-like costume, with a veil initially covering his face to obscure his sex, and myself, in a white, bridal-like dress and veil. This scene mixes a presentation of ceremonial action, with a sense of temporal confusion. The male presence will render the bride character wife and, potentially widow. He marks a present and future, which categorises and aestheticises her.

This is contrasted by the other rituals performed by these characters throughout the series. They exchange clothing and hold one another, they each dress in drag, and perform for the other, they design ritual action for a unique bond, rather than allowing the ritual itself to characterise their relationship.

The other scenes seek to penetrate masculine space with feminine aesthetics, but actions which redefine what those aesthetics typically signify. I laid white veil-like fabric on the lawn and lifted an axe like a barbell. I kissed my muscles, leaving lipstick traces on my bicep. In the masculine study, I wore a vintage gown given to me by my mother and crawled between chairs, and on the table, dragging my nails against its surface. In another of these scenes, I wore a black ensemble I might wear on stage—fishnets, heels, black leotard, and leather jacket—and performed the kind of erratic motions of a live performance in the manor's pink bridal suite. I stood on the vanity and in the windowsill. This scene's particularly feminine aesthetic ultimately saw its inclusion in *Roses*, which was more directly focused on femininity, and the bonds of cisgender women.

The concept for *Roses* originated with a dance night I curated at the Ace Hotel, called Babegang, which included only female-identifying performers and DJs. This series questions the limits and uniqueness of cisgender female bonds, and asks how feminine iconography might be fortified, or manipulated to subversive effect. I focused the series around the image

of the rose as a token image of femininity. The images' red tint is both feminine and violent, as are some of the scenes. Images of blood, and flowers reference fertility, but are paired with unconventional scenes of motherhood. In the scene I reference, my friend Anna reads on a sofa, while her three children are filmed without them knowing. A section of the recording is included in *Roses*, which features her youngest daughter, who, un-directed, dressed herself in various costume pieces throughout the day, and put on red lipstick. The scene shows her facing the camera, and smearing the lipstick across her face. Her face communicates a complicated mix of culpability, defiance, trepidation, and pleasure put in direct relationship to femininity, or her act of destruction toward it.

Several other scenes explore ambiguous sexual, or intimate encounters between female characters. In one scene I tattoo my friend, Amy's inner thigh. The permanent record of an exchange of trust and pain is made at a site on her body rarely seen by others. This is a moment too, when I admit that the scene abides by somewhat internal, or personal logic. The image I tattooed on her was an abstract human figure, originally painted by Henri Matisse on the wall of the Chapel du Rosaire in Vence, France. Amy and I visited this place together, so the intimate, and shared act of tattooing, also permanently documents another shared experience.

In another scene, we exchange an oyster between our mouths. The oyster was chosen for the aphrodisiac qualities it is said to have, and its vaginal appearance. The seemingly gross exchange of food became a precarious and delicate performance, requiring focus, care, and again, trust. In this scene, a confrontation is made by a suggestive confusion of sexual, gross, and feminine images.

Our final scene together dramatises a sadistic and masochistic relationship. This scene is admittedly, extremely lite in comparison to conventional S&M practices, but thinks outside representations whose reliance on bondage aesthetics have become commonplace. The character lying on the ground fantasises about being in a pool of water as she is spit on by a character documenting the experience with a camera.

Apart from the series' focus on these two main female characters—Amy and myself—another scene uses abstract movements of a larger group of women to suggest unity and care amongst the female subjects. This scene is layered with close-up images of roses, whose vague motions draws attention to the complex corporality of the moving bodies.

A common, and significant thread among the works is that I only work with friends. I recognise that the scenes I film have the potential to make people feel uncomfortable. They are personal, they involve the body, sexual representation, being looked at, and they require a level of trust from everyone involved. I feel exceptionally lucky to have found another artist, Liam Cushing, who filmed *Swallower* and *Roses* under my direction. We discuss the themes of the scenes, and why things like a group of women gathered on a floor, or a woman spitting on another has meaning. These are also conversations we have with the other performers in the work. These are not actors who are paid to be there. People ask questions, we engage, and concerns are addressed.

The work produced in 2016 is admittedly less cohesive. I identify this as a product of the time required by the text of this thesis in its latter stages of revision. Some videos which were produced for this portfolio were also ultimately not included for lack of continuity with the other work.

*Dust I* and *Dust II* appropriate seminal works of earth art toward feminist ends. The research questions of this project ask if the relationship to an established work can be re-guided, or re-defined. In *Dust I*, I also question my capacity to creatively respond to work which involves a performance of gender or gendered dynamic I question. By revising the presentation of the relationship in a similar context, I offer feminist alternatives to existing work.

*Dust I* pairs footage shot at Robert Smithson's *The Spiral Jetty* (1970), near Salt Lake City, Utah with intimate home footage shot on trip in Los Angeles. This work references *Swamp* (1969), shot by Robert Smithson and his then-partner, artist, Nancy Holt. In *Swamp*, the

couple navigate tall reeds of a swamp together. Holt holds the camera and is directed by Smithson, behind her. Though Holt films, her vision is compromised. Part of the exercise is that she must exclusively look through the camera lens. Smithson has said this work is about, “deliberate obstructions, or calculated aimlessness.”<sup>306</sup> However, I find the position of control assumed by Smithson to be problematic, considering the struggle experienced by Holt to navigate according to his direction. As a response, *Dust I* manipulates the male/female position of *Swamp* through a collage of perspective, control, and authorship. In one clip, I hold the camera, candidly filming my partner who lays his head on my stomach, and taps my leg. The clip is a passive performance of intimacy, though by filming it, there is an aspect of control, direction, and performative intention from the awareness on my part of being filmed. I utilise the same control, and direction to expose another aspect of intimacy at *Spiral Jetty*. Rather than allowing myself to be directed, I allow my partner to film me, under my direction. I descend onto *Spiral Jetty*, which is revealed slowly, as I incorporate it into performative space.

This is the same process performed at the site of Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1970), in the Moapa Valley, near Overton, Nevada. In this clip, *Dust II*, I am filmed ascending from rubble, crawling out of a deep, rocky crater. *Double Negative* is slowly exposed as the shot pulls away, already reassigned as part of the performance context before it is identifiable. With both of these works, the intention is to perform a feminist appropriation, of land which initially appropriated to serve in the cannon of minimalist and land art.

In *Promises*, I return to many of the same questions and themes surrounding rituals, bonds, and their iconography that were explored in *Swallower*. These images are admittedly simple, but seek to confuse, surprise, and create subtle, curious images that question heteronormative frameworks, and gender norms. By placing an engagement ring on every one of a masculine cisgender man’s fingers, the image of a woman’s hand wearing an engagement ring is troubled. Our awareness is drawn to this symbolic process, as we consider a same-sex

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<sup>306</sup> Robert Smithson, “The Earth, Subject to Cataclysm, Cruel Master,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 179.

appropriation whose theatricality is exaggerated by multiple rings. Theatrical bonding rituals are further troubled by the image's pairing next to a shirtless, tattooed, man holding a large bouquet. The image of the engagement rings suggests we think of this as a bridal bouquet. The femininity, beauty, and purity associated with a bridal role is deflected onto the male figure.

Lastly, I would like to touch on the shared pace of these videos. As I outline in the introduction, these works are meant to visually expand queer and feminist themes during live performances. Their pace has been set to accommodate a viewing experience where focus may be shared between the live, and recorded visual elements. However, I have also identified creative bi-products of this practical decision. Slowness produces anticipation, and highlights anatomical motion.

Though the works included in this portfolio have been produced in my time as a research student at Goldsmiths, they represent an ongoing project that began in 2005, with the production of our band's first music video. These works ask basic questions of gender, how it functions, and where its boundaries are. These works are attentive to how crossing those boundaries feels, and how aesthetics and staged scenes might be manipulated to best communicate those experiences.

## Portfolio

*Swallower*, 2014

<https://vimeo.com/202768215/56f4081eec>

*Roses*, 2015

<https://vimeo.com/202768768/88b64dc102>

*Promises*, 2016

<https://vimeo.com/202758568/947ab462f1>

*Dust I (Spiral Jetty)*, 2016

<https://vimeo.com/213700355/fd60f4b478>

*Dust II (Double Negative)*, 2016

<https://vimeo.com/202769552/158414b7e8>

Drafts and References (Password: ryann)

<https://www.tumblr.com/blog/genderperformace>

## Research Archive

*They Live*, 2005

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py3XOuF27T0>

*The Plastic Surgery Hall of Fame*, 2008

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq41nhUi8TA>

*Dude, Where's My Skin*, 2008

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUZU0XzZ6js>

*Untitled (First Projection)*, 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldlO8KhySeg&t=86s>

*All Yours*, 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDj3rgZV6HU>

*French Waltz*, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxC61hEF04g>

*Funeral Party*, 2012

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CByJ\\_b12ybl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CByJ_b12ybl)

*Bang*, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmOVKIVD36Y>

*Valentine*, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-E52IK58Is>

*Laser Eyes*, 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajpC69vqsvE>

*Marrying Kind*, 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGXFgQV4MSc>