

LADY GAGA, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND PERFORMING AN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a discussion of the role popular musicians play in forming and informing the identities of fans. I specifically look at the ways in which Lady Gaga as an individual, as well as her body of work, provides a framework for fans to craft their own identities. I view popular music and Lady Gaga's career through a feminist lens, analyzing how Gaga's texts, music, videos, performances, and other public appearances are presented to project ideas that coincide with some of the goals of third wave feminism.

Gaga's most fanatic fans, deemed her Little Monsters, craft a large portion of their identities around Gaga's public presentations. Not only do these Little Monsters individually identify with Gaga, they often form communities based around their Gaga centered commonalities. In this thesis I explore those who self-identify as Little Monsters and how being a part of the Monster collective impacts the way in which they view both themselves and others. I also explore how identities are crafted and perpetuated via the internet and online communication.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, Howard Brinson, who always believed I could do anything. Without him, I would have never made it this far.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

On October 19, 2009, popular musician Lady Gaga released the first single from her second album *The Fame Monster*. “Bad Romance” detailed a relationship gone awry, but one that Gaga could not tear herself away from. She called her lover everything from “psycho” to “criminal,” still insistent that she “want(s) your love.” In November of the same year, Gaga released the corresponding video for “Bad Romance,” fully illustrating the depravity of the affair. The corresponding choreography employs gestures reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” and was immediately reproduced on the internet by fans of Lady Gaga as well as by audiences at her *Monster Ball* tour. This gesture provoked the pop star to start calling those who recreated the dance “Little Monsters.” The term “Monsters” could have come from a variety of places, the most immediate being that the album from which the single came was entitled *The Fame Monster* and the corresponding concert tour was called the *Monster Ball*, therefore making Little Monsters a continuation of the rest of her monster themed catalogue. The nickname rapidly transformed from casual pet name to full-fledged fan community.

Over the last two to three years, the name “Monster” has come to represent something much larger than a basic appreciation for all things Gaga. Monsters around the globe are owning this identity and connecting with one another through social media platforms. They utilize the images and sentiments presented by Gaga to form their own identities. In this thesis, I explore how Lady Gaga presents a specific identity to her fans that encompasses feminism, religion, politics, and sexual empowerment, and how this identity is then reflected by Little Monsters as their own personal identities, or at least incorporated into their preexisting identities.

The Rise of Lady Gaga ¹

Lady Gaga, born Stefani Germanotta, was born into an upper middle class Italian family in New York City. She attended a pricy and private Catholic high school, and spent a year at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts before dropping out to pursue a professional music career. Starting out in the singer songwriter genre, she often performed in a group dubbed "The Stefani Germanotta Band." Clips from this time period are still available on Youtube, and demonstrate Germanotta's pre-Gaga lack of theatricality, a piano playing Fiona Apple wannabe. After meeting with producer Rob Fusari, who penned some of her early tracks,² Germanotta shifted her vision from organic sounding acoustic music to disco derived pop. She started go-go dancing and alleges cocaine abuse. It was during this period Germanotta, soon to be Lady Gaga, developed her signature theatricality, inspired by Andy Warhol, David Bowie, and burlesque dancers.

Lady Gaga was born during a 2008 recording session, in which she reminded her producer so much of Queen's Freddie Mercury that he nominally linked her to his track "Radio Ga Ga." Later that year, Germanotta released her first major album, under the Lady Gaga pseudonym. *The Fame*, though not an immediate success, was the platform that launched Germanotta into her now multi-million dollar career as Lady Gaga. Although Gaga released a handful of singles from *The Fame*, it was the release of her third single, "Poker Face," that catapulted her to pop star status. "Poker Face" is a postmodern barrage of text fragments, and its video a collection of seemingly random images without a narrative. In multiple interviews after the release of the single, Gaga suggested that "Poker Face" was representative of her bisexuality,

¹ All biographical information is gathered from Maureen Callahan's biography *Pokerface: The Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga* (Hyperion, 2010) and *Lady Gaga: A Biography* written by Paula Johnson for Greenwood Biographies (Greenwood, 2012).

² Lady Gaga and Rob Fusari, "Paparazzi," "Beautiful, Dirty, Rich," and "Brown Eyes," *The Fame*, Interscope Records, 2008.

of fantasizing about women while being intimate with men. The release of the song not only catapulted Gaga as a musician to the top, but also helped her present the entire package of what Lady Gaga as a product represented. “Poker Face” and her subsequent singles helped present the public with the Lady Gaga brand: sexuality, theatricality, performance art, and self-penned pop songs.

Since her induction into popular culture, Lady Gaga has not only contributed to the catalogue of popular music, but has also worked as an activist for many extra-musical causes, including the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer identified people, anti-bullying legislation, and promoting self acceptance and personal confidence.

Self Reflexivity

I was initially drawn to this topic after attending a performance by Lady Gaga in January of 2010 and a later concert in the spring of 2011. I had been a casual fan of Lady Gaga for quite some time, but observing how fans at these particular concerts viewed Gaga as a text for their own lives and ideologies provided me with the initial ideas for this thesis.

As a fan of popular music and a musician, I am able to comment on how music works to create identities and perpetuate previously existing identities. The music that a person listens to and associates themselves with can have an extraordinary impact on how they define themselves, define others, and structure social identities. Fans of Lady Gaga are no exception to the rule, and perhaps are the greatest current example of people structuring themselves and their cultural formations around popular music and a specific artist.

Prior to conducting this research, I could only guess the ways in which Lady Gaga and her music were used as a foundation for identity creation. By interacting with numerous fans

from around the globe, I discovered that Gaga's entire personal life and body of work function as a basis for conceptions of self and work as commonalities for building shared communities.

Thomas Turino's definition of identity, as a conscious selection of habits and traits used to represent the self, functions as a basis for all discussions of identity in this thesis,³ although other literature concerning identity and music, such as Simon Frith's *Popular Music and Identity* and Lori Burns and Mélisse LaFrance's *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music*. Burns and LaFrance argue that identity is constantly being constructed as "inextricably linked to the sociocultural processes of its construction."⁴ The concept of identity being intertwined with its construction is critical in analyzing how Little Monsters identify themselves. Fans of Gaga utilize their fandom as a habit or trait that they choose to present to others as a representation of themselves, carefully constructing a specific identity. As a self identified feminist, issues of gender and sexuality are extremely important to me, both personally and academically. I will specifically address the issue of gender and sexuality in the thesis, as well as further on in the introduction.

Methodology

Along with utilizing literary sources in this thesis, I also acted as a participant observer and conducted formal interviews via the internet. Because the Little Monster community, and Gaga's career itself, are by and large transnational, the convergent space of the community is not a physical space, but a virtual one. Observing this community required taking part in its virtual reality. I largely found participants through the website LittleMonsters.com. LittleMonsters.com

³ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 95.

⁴ Lori Burns and Mélisse LaFrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

is a social network which, at the time of my research, was in beta stage and available only to a small amount of randomly selected fans. I also used the social network Tumblr. Although Tumblr is not a specifically Gaga related website, one on which the Little Monster community is very active. I contacted fans through my own recruitment posts and by responding to their own posts on these sites. I also participated in discussions and posts not related to my thesis and observed many posts that I did not directly participate in, in order to fully expose myself to the Monster community, the way it functions, and the community's connections to Gaga. Further research on these topics could be conducted through physical ethnographic research, however, due to time and geographic restraints, physical ethnography was not an option for this thesis.

Outline of Chapters

This thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 is a comparison between Lady Gaga and two other contemporary female popular musicians, Taylor Swift and Katy Perry. I analyze one single released by each artist, focusing on the musical material, text, and accompanying music video. These three aspects are synthesized to create an overarching narrative, perspective, and commentary on female sexuality. Each artist expresses a distinct viewpoint on female sexuality, including its purposes and its consequences. I then explore how and why, through these presentations of sexuality, some listeners prefer Gaga's viewpoint over Swift's or Perry's.

In Chapter 2, I draw connections between feminist thought and Lady Gaga's body of work. Gaga often presents ideas of subversive femininity in both her music and appearance. She often utilizes femme gender expressions, or a flamboyant gender expression based on exaggerating a traditionally feminine appearance, or appears in drag, blurring the societally

accepted gender binary and working to overturn expectations of women in popular music and the mass media spotlight. Gaga's model of subversive femininity is often taken up by fans and utilized as a text for their own expressions of feminism.

Chapter 3 addresses how the Little Monster identity functions on both a personal and collective level. I discuss the avenues through which the community is both constructed and enacted, specifically focusing on the social networking website LittleMonsters.com. In this chapter I utilize ethnographic data collected on the LittleMonsters.com to discuss how fans of Lady Gaga use the values projected through Gaga's work as a text for their own personal identity, and as a shared text for the Monster community.

A Brief History of Feminism

The research conducted and conclusions drawn in this thesis rely on literature published in the fields of feminism, identity politics, popular culture, and communication studies, among others. Each of these fields is interdisciplinary and all are intrinsically linked to one another. In this section I will address major sources from each of these fields and how they directly apply to my own research. Many of these sources can be categorized into more than one of the aforementioned disciplinary fields, and their places within this literature review will be based on how they are utilized in this thesis.

Lady Gaga has certainly been influenced by third wave feminism, if not first and second wave. This thesis draws directly on feminist and gender studies literature and the interactions between feminism, gender politics, Lady Gaga, and her fans. In this thesis, I utilize literature written by Judith Butler, Susan McClary, Elizabeth Keenan, Sheila Whiteley, Lisa Lewis, Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, and Philip Auslander, as well as others. These scholars address

gender studies and feminism, often in conjunction with popular music. Many of these authors are pivotal figures in women's and gender studies research, and have greatly contributed to my own readings, analyses, and conclusions.

Feminism as a movement is generally identified in three distinct periods, or waves.⁵ bell hooks, in the book *Feminism is for Everybody*, describes how although the movements are separate, they all share the same basic goal of wanting gender justice. First wave feminism, which worked towards gender justice in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, was centered most prominently around de jure inequalities, and specifically women's suffrage. First wave feminists fought to overturn mandated inequalities, including suffrage, marriage rights, such as sexual independence and property rights, and reproductive rights.

Second wave feminism began in the 1960s, and lasted into the late 1980s and early 1990s. The focus of second wave feminism had less to do with previously mandated inequalities, and more to do with unwritten, or de facto inequality. Second wave feminists questioned the existence of patriarchal society in a larger way than first wave feminists, and worked towards equality in multiple aspects of society, including employment, wages, education, reproductive, and sexual rights.

The latter part of second wave feminism saw an alignment with ideas of poststructuralism and postmodernism, making way for the realization that metanarratives of feminism did not account for the experiences of all women. The rejection of feminist metanarratives unleashed a backlash against its middle-class, white origins, and worked towards a more inclusive, non-western, non-white, and non-privileged concept of feminism and women's rights. This led

⁵ A large portion of the summary of feminist history is based off of the essays in the third edition of *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (McGraw-Hill, 2009), *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future (10th Anniversary Edition)* written by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (Macmillan 2010), and bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (South End Press, 2000).

directly into third wave feminism which is cited as having began in 1992 with Rebecca Walker's piece "Becoming the Third Wave,"⁶ although the waves of feminism are in no way completely disconnected from one another.

Third wave feminism is often criticized for not having a cohesive enough goal, and includes all of the second wave struggles, as well as more inclusive ideas of equality. Contemporary feminists work for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights, as well as ending race based discrimination, and view gender as a social construct which underpins a large part of the world. Third wave feminism is concerned with the portrayal and reinforcement of these problems through mass media, and actively campaigns to create more inclusive representations of human beings in the media.

Literature Review

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1991, is a pivotal, contested, and celebrated feminist text, and seeks to break down a normative gender binary. Butler views gender through the lens of philosophy, feminist thought, and identity politics, questioning the very concept of gender. Additionally, she asserts that whether male or female, gender is a societal construct. She argues that "woman" as the subject of feminism presumes a unification of biological sex and gender, and negates the experiences of anyone who falls outside of that unification. Butler suggests ways in which the masculine/feminine gender binary can be deconstructed, including gender parody, language, and generally reconceptualizing identity categories as being productions rather than factually based realities. Her deconstruction of gender and question of "woman" as a coherent subject is a foundational concept of contemporary feminism, and informs Lady Gaga's own feminist expressions and gender subversions. Butler's

⁶ Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms. Magazine*, January, 1992: 39-42.

theories of drag performance particularly play into Gaga's subversive expressions of gender, including both masculine and feminine identities.

Susan McClary's 1991 book *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, brought feminism to the forefront of musicology. McClary approaches musicology from a lens of feminist gender politics, addressing both traditional musicological topics such as works by Beethoven, Monteverdi, Tchaikovsky, and Bizet, as well as the non-traditional subject of popular music, and more specifically Madonna. In the introduction to *Feminine Endings*, the author proposes five categories used to devise questions and function as a provisional methodology: musical constructions of gender and sexuality, gendered aspects of traditional music theory, gender and sexuality in musical narrative, music as a gendered discourse, and discursive strategies of women musicians. McClary's work is often viewed⁷ as both presumptive and "insightful and exciting."⁸ McClary works to expose gender hierarchies in western art music, but often uses the words "masculine" and "feminine" without any definition, as well as "women" as a signifier for all female persons.⁹ McClary assumes a standard of the "feminine," something Butler criticized in *Gender Trouble*, released around the same time as *Feminine Endings*. McClary does recognize that her own reactions to art music and what it may imply are influenced by her own experiences, but does not necessarily problematize the influence of cultural media on her own readings. McClary, unfortunately, reasserts problematic aspects of gender discourses by asserting that western art music is often devoid of the voice of "women" as

⁷ Jann Pasler paints *Feminine Endings* in both positive and negative lights in her review "Some Thoughts on Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*," in *Perspectives of New Music* 30, 1992.

⁸ Susan C. Cook, "Musicology and the Undoing of Women," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 155-162.

⁹ Elizabeth Sayrs, "Deconstructing McClary: Narrative, Feminine Sexuality, and Feminism in Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*," *College Music Symposium* 33/34 (1993/1994): 41-55. Sayrs also relies on Butler's criticism of "women" as a universal subject and critique of the masculine/feminine binary. (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2-4.)

a whole. However, McClary's work is not all problematic, and her assessments of Madonna and gender in popular music were quite informative in the writing of this thesis.

Sheila Whiteley has also been extremely influential in the incorporation of feminist thought and gender politics into music scholarship. Her collection of essays, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity*, iterated the importance of popular music in both reinforcing and destabilizing patriarchy and misogyny. Whiteley relies heavily on other feminist theorists and philosophers, including Rosemary Tong, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler. Whiteley writes about gender subversion through a variety of female popular artists, and her ideas directly influence the ways in which Lady Gaga's expressions of gender can be read. Lisa A. Lewis also made a great contribution to the fields of gender studies, feminism, and popular music with her book *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, in which she analyzes and critiques the way gender is perceived in popular music, as well as how female popular artists and MTV have a voice in cultural politics and can help shape gender ideologies.

The study of identity politics came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, when critical theory began to take hold of academic disciplines, and is now a major part of a number of fields. Music in general, and subsequently music scholarship, is intertwined with concepts of identity politics and negotiation. In his book *Music as Social Life: Politics of Participation*, Thomas Turino defines identity and subsequently how it fits into musical life. Turino addresses the role that musical participation plays in forming identity using the theoretical framework of Peircean semiotics. Turino's conceptualizations of individual and social identities directly informed the definition of Little Monster as both an individual and social identity.

Stan Hawkins' *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Texts and Identity Politics* integrates the study of identity with the field of popular culture. Hawkins' discussions on both individual identity and

popular musicians constructing and performing identities through artistic expression were important in my research. Hawkins also discusses the reading of irony in popular texts, specifically through the use of parody and pastiche, both of which are utilized by Lady Gaga as platforms for irony and social commentary.

Katherine Meizel's *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* also greatly informed my analyses of identity. Meizel's look at how identity is constructed in popular culture is an important resource in the field of popular music, and is a current take on how mass media works to create and perpetuate identities on both the personal and collective levels. Meizel specifically addresses the crafting of identities on the television program *American Idol*, and I found her discussion of how these identities are performed or perpetuated via the internet beneficial to the writing of this thesis.

The edited volume *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* proved extremely useful in the analyzing the videos of Gaga and her contemporaries. Essays included in this monograph written by Jody Berland and Will Straw were particularly informative, and address how the medium of music video functions as a social commentary and provides a space for musical meaning.

I also utilized many colloquial sources, including popular culture magazines and blog entries, as well as other online articles and corresponding commentaries. Outside of observing and participating in the Little Monster community and interviewing those who identify as Monsters, these colloquial sources were critical in gathering non-academia based opinions of Lady Gaga, popular music, and other topics covered in this thesis, and connecting academic theory and realistic practice.

CHAPTER I: COMPARING AND GRAPPLING WITH PRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN POPULAR MUSIC VIDEO

The way in which popular musicians present themselves or are presented by others in music videos can have a large effect on the way they are perceived by fans and audiences. Since the conception of the music video in the late 1970s, sexuality has been an ongoing theme, and often a musician's career is greatly impacted by the videos they star in. Pop stars have often utilized the music video medium to project a crafted and purposeful identity to consumers. In the book *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place*, John Connell and Chris Gibson argue that popular music is "an integral component of processes through which cultural identities are formed, both at personal and collective levels."¹⁰ Focusing on the personal levels of identity, it seems as though popular artists are always trying to present an image that distinguishes them from other musicians, forming an identity that can be communicated to mass audiences. This identity is often purposefully crafted to send a particular message or convey a particular meaning.

In this chapter, I will compare and contrast the identities created through music video by Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and Taylor Swift. I will focus specifically on the aspects of female sexuality presented through these identities, and the effects and implications these presentations may have. I explore how Swift, through her single "Fifteen" presents an self-image of chastity and purity, and implies that straying from her chosen path may lead to unfavorable consequences, how Gaga presents an image of extreme sexuality and control, and how Perry's sexual availability implies a submissiveness towards men. Between September of 2009 and June

¹⁰ John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 117.

of 2010 all of the aforementioned artists premiered a music video, each of which communicated a particular viewpoint on and presentation of female sexuality. Popular music scholar Stan Hawkins in the book *Settling the Pop Score* describes popular music as a place where identity is constantly evolving and is built on constructed differences.¹¹ He asserts that “identities are performatively constituted by the artists’s expression,” and that gender hierarchy is often intertwined with these performative expressions and constructed differences.¹² Swift, Perry, and Gaga play into patriarchal hierarchy in explicitly different ways in order to differentiate themselves from one another and create an identity linked to their own performance of sexuality. The three music videos I will discuss clearly convey a specific perspective on female sexuality, and this perspective becomes drastically clearer when comparing them. Finally, I will address the consequences these presentations of female sexuality have, and specifically why fans and audiences of Lady Gaga often find her perspective on female sexuality more accessible than Swift’s or Perry’s.

Jody Berland argues in her essay “Music Video and Media Reconstruction” that “each innovation in the technically mediated reproduction of sound or image precipitates new forms of social practice,” and that these changes “produce meaning for music.”¹³ She goes on to say that music video “frames the song, encloses it in a shared symbolic space, and invites us to enter that space.”¹⁴ Through the invention of music video, pop musicians are able to produce specific meanings that frame the message communicated through the audible song, meanings that can have socio-cultural effects.

¹¹ Stan Hawkins, *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Text and Identity Politics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ Jody Berland, “Music Video and Media Reconstruction,” in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993): 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

I will begin by looking at Taylor Swift's November 2009 release, "Fifteen," followed by Katy Perry's spring 2010 hit "California Gurls," and finally Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance." I specifically chose these three singles because of the narrow time frame in which they were released and the enormous popularity of the singles. I will draw connections between what I consider to be the three most prominent aspects of the film-- musical material, lyrics or text, and the moving picture itself -- and the artists' creation and presentation of a sexuality and feminine identity. I argue that through these means, the artists carefully represent a specific trope of female sexuality, purposefully crafted to impact an audience in a very specific way.

Taylor Swift: "Fifteen"

Taylor Swift, a twenty something pop/country crossover, has been crafting her public identity for the better half of a decade. Swift prides herself on being a role model for young girls and women and makes her views of sexuality explicitly known within the context of her own lyrics and music videos. She constantly references and represents purity and innocence, even conveying a sense of pity for those who stray from her chosen path. Swift's 2010 single and video for the song "Fifteen" clearly demonstrate her essentialized and dichotomized portrayals of sexuality.

Swift's self-penned "Fifteen" describes a young girl (fifteen, in fact) on her initial day of high school. In the first verse she recounts her experiences, time and again mentioning the cute boys that will "wink at you" and say hello.¹⁵ The overarching narrative created by Swift is that fifteen year old girls are naive enough to give in to the demands of these boys. However, Swift is now wise to their ways and can tell the fifteen year old listener of her adolescent experiences as a sort of cautionary tale.

¹⁵ Taylor Swift, "Fifteen," *Fearless*, (Big Machine Records, 2008).

“Fifteen” clearly depicts two main characters: Taylor, as described in the first verse, and Abigail. In the second verse of the song Swift introduces us to Abigail, Taylor’s best friend. Taylor sings about Abigail’s first date and first kiss. In the bridge of the song, Swift explains how at fifteen, one may think they’re going to marry their first boyfriend, but Taylor realized she had bigger dreams. She continues that “Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his mind,” suggesting that all Abigail had was her virginity. The girls then mourn the loss of Abigail’s sexual innocence, supposedly the only thing she had that was worthwhile. This little snippet seems to insinuate that if Abigail had had bigger dreams, this wouldn’t have happened to her, illustrating the idea that abstinence is the only empowering choice for young women who wish to succeed in life.

Through the text based image painted by Swift, Abigail’s plight of lost innocence doesn’t seem too bad. However, the musical material and corresponding film help solidify her downfall. The entirety of the song is in G major, not in an extremely fast tempo, but more of what could be described as a relaxed andante, and the tessitura of “Fifteen” along with Swift’s airy vocal texture helps musically portray her innocence. The song continues with the familiar repetition of a pop song, as the chordal structure stays the same for both the verses and the chorus, moving between G major, C major, and the relative e minor. This progression continues on until Swift reaches the moment where Abigail just “wanted to be wanted” by a boy. At this point, the song gets significantly heavier, emphasizing the minor. Swift’s light and somewhat syncopated guitar pattern transforms into a heavy strum, straight and continually accenting the beat. Although the song moves back to the major progression when Swift emphasizes Abigail’s giving of “everything she had,” the song reaches a very soft dynamic, Swift’s voice lowers in volume, until the song crescendos to emphasize the climactic point that they “both cried.” These musical

changes clearly indicate the drama and darkness of Abigail's situation. Swift's voice, which has been described as small and fragile,¹⁶ as well as whispery,¹⁷ and thin,¹⁸ also communicates an innocent and virginal identity. Roland Barthes' analysis of vocal grain in the essay "The Grain of the Voice" suggests that the grain of the voice is representative of the physical body of the singer.¹⁹ Swift's ostensibly pure body is communicated through her almost childlike voice. Barthes suggests that the importance of the grain of the voice is not simply in its timbral characteristics, but in its significance. Swift's textual representation of the innocent virgin is only amplified by the purity her grain signifies. When the corresponding visuals are added to the text and music, the listener/viewer is presented with a clearly crafted portrayal of Swift's ideas about sexuality.

Author Martha Bayles states that in music videos, if lyrics are present, the obvious choice is to illustrate them.²⁰ This is precisely what happens with "Fifteen." The video opens with Swift walking in a field in a flowing white dress, the epitome of purity. At this point in time Swift is portraying the autobiographical character Taylor, who looks hopeful, and is enamored with high school and the cute boys she sees. As Taylor meets Abigail, the physical and psychological antithesis of the virginal protagonist, the lighting gets darker. Abigail is pictured in a car with a boy, whose arm is around her. The setting of this scene (a convertible on a cliff at night, overlooking a beautiful view) paints an image of the Grease-esque concept of "parking." The idea of Abigail going parking with a boy while Swift whispers the most angst-filled part of the song illustrates the trope of lost teenage virginity in American popular culture, and along with it,

¹⁶ "Taylor Swift- Vocal Profile/Range," *Diva Devotee*, <http://www.divadevotee.com/2010/11/taylor-swift-vocal-profilerange.html>, accessed August 4, 2012.

¹⁷ "Taylor Swift," <http://www.chiff.com/pop-culture/taylor-swift.htm>, accessed August 3, 2012.

¹⁸ "Taylor Swift: Fearless or Tone-less?" November 17, 2009, <http://blogs.reuters.com/fanfare/2009/11/17/taylor-swift-fearless-or-tone-less/>, accessed August 3, 2012.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 188.

²⁰ Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Swift's view of such an incident. It is worth noting that for the entirety of the video Swift dons a flowing white dress, a sartorial expression of her abstinence. Similar to Barthes' assertion of the vocal grain inserting the body into the sound, the music video reconnects the listener with the physical performer. Berland argues in "Music Video and Media Reconstruction" that at the advent of sound recording, the singer was "split from the song, and from the listener, whose relation to the singer is mediated by the song."²¹ The music video reunites the body of the singer with the sound, and in this particular case serves to reiterate the presentation of purity and sexual innocence.

The combination of the three aforementioned analyses paints the picture of Swift's purposefully created identity and expression of abstinence based empowerment. Through this one song alone, Swift shows us the trouble a girl can get into if she becomes sexually active, and invariably the success one can achieve if she waits. In the book *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape*, contributor Thomas Macaulay Millar describes this view of sex as the "commodity model."²² Echoing Millar's definition of this commodity model of sexuality, Swift "assumes that when a woman has sex she loses something of value."²³ Swift's empowerment is enacted through the theory that by not engaging in sexual activity she was able to accomplish larger goals. Her essentialized view of sex presents the idea that it is something to fear, not enjoy, a readily accepted viewpoint of female sexuality in American patriarchal society. Although Swift appears to be stressing ideas of self empowerment, she is still clearly within the accepted sociocultural norms.

²¹ Berland, "Music Video and Media Reconstruction," 28.

²² Thomas Macaulay Millar, "Toward a Performance Model of Sex," *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, ed. Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti (Berkeley, California: Seal Press 2008), 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 38.

Previously mentioned author John Connell describes the lyrical value of country music, a genre that Swift has overtaken, as “the antithesis of feminist perspectives of gender relations.”²⁴ Country music often reinforces patriarchal standards and power structures, and Swift’s portrayal of sexuality is no exception. According to a columnist at the feminist periodical, *Bitch Magazine*, Connell is correct, stating heatedly that according to Taylor Swift and the song “Fifteen”, teenage girls have two choices: “have sex and wind up broken and sad and feeling as if you’ve lost ‘everything you had’ or wait until your untouched vagina accumulates enough charge to make you rich and famous.”²⁵ Although this sentiment is a little sensational and extreme, it conveys the dichotomized view of Swift’s sexuality, and consequently the pure and virginal identity that she projects to listener and consumer. Swift problematizes sexuality under the cover of empowerment and invariably her own success.

Lady Gaga: “Bad Romance”

In November of 2009, Lady Gaga released a video for the single “Bad Romance,” in which she crafts an identity clearly in support of female empowerment and command of sexuality. Through the music, lyrics, and visuals presented in “Bad Romance,” Gaga performs an obviously sexual femininity as well as an explicit and controlling sexuality in order to empower herself, and consequently other female identified persons.

Through the text of “Bad Romance,” Gaga is open about what she wants, whether it be the touch of your hand, your “leather studded kiss in the sand,” or that she “wants it bad.”²⁶ The lyrics of “Bad Romance,” rather than following a linear storyline, are an abstract barrage of

²⁴ Connell and Gibson, *Sound Tracks*, 79.

²⁵ Sady Doyle, “Taylor Swift Wants to Ban Access to Your Lady Bits,” *Bitch Media*, October 9, 2009. <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/taylor-swift-wants-to-ban-access-to-your-lady-bits>.

²⁶ Lady Gaga, “Bad Romance,” *The Fame Monster* (Interscope 2009).

sexual, violent, grotesque, and melancholy phrases. Through the abstraction, however, Gaga is free to say whatever she chooses, and through textual means, the artist expresses her controlling view of sexuality.

The music for “Bad Romance” is heavy, in A minor, with Gaga’s voice sounding in an extremely low register, often reaching an E3. The deep tessitura of “Bad Romance” helps Gaga achieve what popular music scholar Stan Hawkins would describe as felt qualities of vocal grain, or vocal characteristics that draw the listener to the physical body of the singer, and helps further express sexuality through her sound. The actual utterances of the voice denote physical and emotional sensations:²⁷ sexuality being communicated first and foremost in this situation. The almost palpable sounds created by Gaga are in stark contrast to those of Swift, whose higher register and breathy tones provide a sense of youth and innocence, while Gaga’s lower tones give the listener a sense of a more experienced woman. At the climax of the song, Gaga uses powerful vocal embellishments to denote the same sort of felt utterances described above, providing an emotional and commanding sound. Again referencing Barthes, Lady Gaga inserts her body into her vocal performances. If, as Barthes claims, the grain is “the body in the voice as it sings,”²⁸ Gaga makes her sexualized body particularly evident in her performance of “Bad Romance.” Her grain signifies her sexualized body and sonically represents her sexual power and control.

The “Bad Romance” music video, contrary to Bayles’ suggestion of simply illustrating the given lyrics, creates a narrative separate from the abstract sung text. Will Straw describes the music video format in general as a postmodern text made up of “disruptive metonymy” abundant with signifiers.²⁹ Gaga uses fragmentary signifiers, rather than a linear narrative, to communicate a specific female sexuality. She is portrayed in what is deemed at the beginning of the video the

²⁷ Hawkins, *Settling the Pop Score*, 47.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” 88.

²⁹ Will Straw, “Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s,” in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, 10.

“Bath Haus of Gaga,” although this bathhouse appears to be more traumatizing than relaxing. The singer is stripped, bathed, and primed in order to dance for, and be auctioned off to, a group of men. Gaga is seen at one point, in a bathtub, crying, leading the viewer to assume she doesn’t want to be part of this auction, or subsequently, the inevitable bad romance. Sheila Whiteley addresses Madonna’s “Express Yourself” video as “fragmentary - playing on a bricolage of images which suggest, rather than confirm, a narrative exposition of events and a sense of resolution.”³⁰ Similarly, “Bad Romance” is a fragmentary metonymy, flashing images that evoke a story line from which a conclusion can be drawn, but not without the viewers’ interpretation.

Gaga herself is quoted as saying that the video is meant to invoke images of human trafficking, women as commodities, and the way the entertainment industry perceives female pop stars.³¹ The “Bad Romance” video clearly depicts what communication scholars Curtis A. Fogel and Andrea Quinlan describe as “vivid depictions of male power over women’s bodies.”³² They argue that Gaga’s clear depiction of human trafficking “depicts extreme violence against women” but concludes with an illustration of retribution as the antagonist is violently killed.³³ Through this extreme revenge, Gaga presents her own empowerment and agency. Although her sexuality was in the hands of others throughout the music video, she violently reclaims her own power by utilizing that sexuality in a manipulative manner.

The depictions of patriarchal power are then shifted. After Gaga is sold to the highest bidder, she arrives in his boudoir in her under garments. The next time we see her by the highest bidders bed, he is aflame, and she is watching him burn. The video concludes as Gaga is shown

³⁰ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge 2001):142.

³¹ Ann Powers, “Frank Talk With Lady Gaga,” *LA Times*, December 13, 2009.

³² Curtis A. Fogel and Andrea Quinlan, “Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate,” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 7 (2011): 185.

³³ Fogel and Quinlan. “Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate,” 185.

in bed with the remains of the charred man, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. She also wears a conical pyrotechnic bra, recalling the subversive nature of Madonna's sexuality (something that will be addressed in a subsequent chapter) and continuing to manipulate it through violent means. Through this, according to Fogel and Quinlin, Gaga is no longer representative of a victim, but is "a powerful woman who has exacted revenge."³⁴ She uses the power exuded by the male characters in the video as a guise to eventually gain the upper hand. Gaga's version of empowerment is projected in a much more literal way in "Bad Romance" than Swift's in "Fifteen." Gaga uses her sexuality to empower and free herself from the constraints placed on her by her male captors and bidders.

Through Gaga's fragmentary video, she exerts the idea of female empowerment to the point of control. When she is being auctioned off, one could assume that Gaga is purposefully dancing in an erotic manner for the man who is bidding on her. Although there is no exact script for this narrative anywhere, we can infer that she knows what So Why is to become of this man. She does not want to be in this bad romance, as illustrated by the fragmented images of a distraught Gaga, but realizes it will happen. She is vengeful and vindictive, and wants to see him literally burn. According to the narrative outlined by Gaga in her interview with the LA Times, we can view the man as a symbol of the misogynist entertainment industry and patriarchal society, and interpret her actions as a reclamation of both of these things, as gaining control over these oppressive institutions through her sexuality.

Katy Perry: "California Gurls"

The single "California Gurls," released off of Katy Perry's 2010 album *Teenage Dream*, falls somewhere between the extremes of Gaga and Swift. Perry presents a more expected view

³⁴ Fogel and Quinlan. "Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate," 185.

of female sexuality in popular music. Similarly to “Bad Romance,” “California Gurls” is not a linear story line, but rather a statement addressing Perry’s idea of the “California gurl.” She sings that California girls (as Perry herself is one) are unforgettable, largely because of their “daisy dukes/ bikinis on top/ sun-kissed skin, so hot we’ll melt your popsicle.”³⁵ In this reference, Perry is projecting a clear, visual image of sexuality and subsequently the effect it will have on the male population. She’s making the audience aware of her sexuality, without representing anything physically sexual. Throughout the piece the text carries messages of a carefree party lifestyle and a sexuality geared toward male enjoyment.

A 2006 article featured in the *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* performed a content analysis of over 100 songs, drawing conclusions regarding the portrayal and representation of women in popular music. Objectification of women and women trying to sexually attract men were of the most common themes found in the sample group.³⁶ In “California Gurls,” Perry addresses men directly, by using phallic innuendos and constantly alluding to the fact that “California Gurls” are sexually appealing. Textually, the song addresses only socioculturally normative and male centered subject matter.

The musical material of “California Gurls” is entirely electronic, in the key of F major with an extremely upbeat tempo. The form is a standard strophic form with sixteen bar periods, and the piece is generally musically inline with expectations of a popular song, even featuring a verse performed by popular rap artist Snoop Dogg, in place of a bridge, a phenomenon common among successful female popular musicians.³⁷ The range of “California Gurls” sounds

³⁵ Katy Perry, “California Gurls,” *Teenage Dream* (Capitol Records 2010).

³⁶ Brook Bretthauer, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, and James H. Banning, “A Feminist Analysis of Popular Music: Power Over, Objectification of, and Violence Against Women,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 18 (2006): 39-41.

³⁷ Some female popular artists who have utilized a rap verse in place of or in conjunction with a bridge are Jennifer Lopez, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Mariah Carey among others.

comfortable for Perry's voice, and is easily sung along to. Perry's voice, although recognizable, does not carry the same sort of bodily grain implied by Gaga and Swift. Neither her text nor vocal characteristics point to any bodily or physical sensation. She sings the lyrics, but seems to be making a statement rather than projecting a physical connection to the material as done by Swift and Gaga. The song is upbeat, catchy, and danceable. It provides all of the functions of a popular song and presents a patriarchally accepted attitude of female sexuality without actually making a critical statement.

In Nicola Dibben's article "Representations of Femininity in Popular Music," she discusses ways in which popular music can affirm patriarchal constructions of femininity, outlining one of the most typical archetypes of patriarchally constructed femininity as "an image in which women are simultaneously submissive, innocent and childlike, yet sexually available."³⁸ This patriarchal concept is the premise for the "California Gurls" video. Perry is pictured as a game piece, being manipulated within a life size Candy Land like game by Snoop Dogg. She is directed through the game as Snoop Dogg rolls his dice, deciding where she'll go next. As a glitter covered game piece she is childlike, innocent, and clearly submissive to the player of the game, yet simultaneously sexually available. She is often pictured lying naked on a cloud and, in the most overtly sexual moment of the video, sprays whip cream from her breasts. In an article on the women's news site, Jezebel, this is interpreted as Perry showing her availability for sexual consumption,³⁹ again for the pleasure of male viewers. She utilizes childlike themes in order to portray a socially accepted view of feminine innocence, but simultaneously uses those themes to project her own normative and explicit sexuality.

³⁸ Nicola Dibben, "Representations of Femininity in Popular Music," *Journal of Popular Music* 18 (1999): 336.

³⁹ Dodai Stewart, "Dumb and Frothy Will Always Win Pop," *Jezebel*, June 10, 2010, jezebel.com/5560271/we-want-our-lady-pop-stars-frothy-and-thats-okay, accessed May 7, 2012.

In the text, visuals, and musical material for “California Gurls” Perry, too, crafts an identity and perspective on female sexuality. By celebrating the way males look at her in the text and seemingly enjoying the game of Candy Land in which she lacks authority and agency, Perry appears to be catering her sexuality for the enjoyment of men. Her sexuality has little to do with herself, contrary to both Gaga and Swift. While “Fifteen” and “Bad Romance” promote female control of sexuality, albeit in extraordinarily different ways, “California Gurls” promotes the socio-culturally accepted view of male centered female sexuality.

So Why Gaga?

Why are Gaga’s ardent fans attracted to the presentations of sexuality and femininity presented by Gaga, rather than those of other pop stars like Swift and Perry? Is Gaga’s depiction of female sexuality and empowerment truly more relatable and accessible than Swift’s empowered abstinence or Perry’s patriarchal femininity? Two major reasons for the preference seem most apparent: first, Gaga is seen as the lesser of the evils, and second, she truly does empower some women. In the vein of the first reason, one mother who had recently attended one of Swift’s performances had this to say: “Better to have to explain the explicit sexuality of someone like Gaga and her ‘Born this Way’ message than to have to undo the message of female powerlessness.”⁴⁰ Although this parent found Gaga’s sexuality to be explicit, she found the damaging effect of Swift’s version of femininity to be more powerless than empowering. Although all three women share a similar demographic, as made clear by their online fan bases, Perry has been criticized for being more damaging than Gaga because her lollipops and board

⁴⁰ Andrea Lampos, “Parent Regrets: Why I Wish We Never Had Gone to See Taylor Swift,” *Huffington Post Parents*, August 16, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/andrea-lampos/taylor-swift_b_928371.html?ref=fb&src=sp, accessed May 1, 2012.

game motifs also appeal to a much younger audience than the intended MTV age demographic.⁴¹

Also, an essay on the feminist website *Feministing* accused Gaga of reinforcing attitudes of misogyny, but asserted that all things considered, she is still less problematic than Perry's trivialization of the objectification of women.⁴² In all of the above examples the projected sexuality of the other pop star is seen as more damaging to female sexuality and women in general than that of Gaga.

In an interview with me, one fan disclosed that she preferred Gaga's presentation of female sexuality over Perry and Swift, and when asked why, asserted:

The reason why I think Katy Perry's and Taylor Swift's brand of sexuality is more problematic than Gaga's is because they both are sending faulty messages about sexuality. Katy Perry exploits her body and pretty much conveys herself as a "lollipop" for men. Her lyrics support this image and give young girls (especially) the wrong impression about their self-image: that being their bodies are a product for men to objectify. Taylor Swift on the other end of spectrum portrays innocence and lack of sexuality. Her image upholds that taboo on sexuality and further entrenches the ideal of "the girl next door"-- perfect in her appearance, demeanor, behavior, etc. Whereas Gaga embraces authentic sexual expression and uses fashion to simulate different womanly body shapes and embraces different forms of sexual expression. Personally, I believe the sexual expression/sexuality is on a continuum and Gaga embraces all of it. Taylor Swift and Katy Perry create a dichotomy, of which both choices are unattainable, inauthentic, and ultimately self-shaming (due to the fact that you will have to reject your true sexuality in order to adhere to theirs).⁴³

This particular fan, a 23 year old woman named Melissa, recognizes the sexualities performed by Swift and Perry to be damaging to female empowerment. She views Swift's virginal purity in contrast to Perry's male centric sexuality, neither of which she feels represent her own sexuality. Gaga's performance, although over the top, functions as a catch-all in this situation: it is so outlandish and broad that it represents more attainable forms of sexual expression.

⁴¹ "Katy Perry is No Role Model For our Little Girls," *The Sun Online*, April 10, 2012, Comment Section.

⁴² Tee, "Where are Feminism's Modern Musical Icons?" *Feministing*, March 2, 2012. <http://community.feministing.com/2012/03/02/where-are-feminisms-modern-musical-icons/>, accessed May 20, 2012.

⁴³ Melissa, online interview with author, May 30, 2012.

This isn't to say that audiences don't appreciate Swift's innocence or find Gaga's hypersexuality to be a poor influence. One Swift fan argued that she was a better role model than other entertainers because "she represents that it's okay to wait and if someone doesn't want to wait for you, move on."⁴⁴ Similarly, there may be those that prefer Perry's brand of female sexuality over Gaga or Swift. Many Perry fans feel that Gaga is "weird,"⁴⁵ whereas Perry's more normative sensibilities are easier to relate to.⁴⁶ Gaga's nontraditional, non-normative presentation of female sexuality can most certainly be a turn off to some listeners, who feel they cannot relate to her overt sexuality, often presented in controversial contexts (such as human trafficking.)

Although some may claim Gaga is just the lesser of the popular music evils, a large number of women also find her brand of female sexuality empowering. Fogel and Quinlan ponder whether Lady Gaga's images of sexuality can "be perceived as a sign of increased liberation of women?"⁴⁷ This is the general consensus of the majority of Lady Gaga fans. One fan explained to me that because Gaga pushes the boundaries of what's accepted for female sexuality and uses sex to her advantage she is empowering fans.⁴⁸ Another fan articulated that Gaga's sexuality is "raw" and "natural" while that of other pop stars comes across as "put on."⁴⁹ She went on to say that "Gaga's rawness is a symbol of her sexual power: how she wants sex for her enjoyment, not so a man will love her."⁵⁰ Similarly, feminist pop culture blog Feminist Fatale argues that "California Gurls" is infested with "insipid, sexually explicit lyrics that promote

⁴⁴ "Taylor Swift: Why She Is A Good Role Model," February 19, 2010, <http://voices.yahoo.com/taylor-swift-why-she-good-role-model-5497941.html>, accessed August 3, 2012.

⁴⁵ Katy Perry Forum, "Lady Gaga vs. Katy Perry," <http://katyperryforum.com/index.php?topic=6714.0>, accessed August 9, 2012. a

⁴⁶ Further research could be conducted on the preference of Swift or Perry over Gaga by interviewing fans. For the purpose of this thesis, I focused primarily on why some fans prefer Gaga, however there are those that do not for various reasons.

⁴⁷ Fogel and Quinlan, "Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate," 185.

⁴⁸ Poison Prince. online interview with author. April 8, 2012.

⁴⁹ Amethyst, online interview with author, April 10, 2012.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

nothing more than a Candyland piece waiting to be eaten up by Snoop Dogg” and that Perry “does a perfect job of keeping women in an overly sexualized one-dimensional category.”⁵¹ In another article Fatale praises Gaga for turning sex into a powerful and positive subject.⁵² This isn’t to say all fans of popular music feel this way, only that some perceive Lady Gaga as a better female role model for the aforementioned reasons.

It seems that Lady Gaga’s place in the world of popular music relies on the two aforementioned statuses. Is she truly an empowering role model for women? Or is she just the least damaging of many popular musicians? Consumers of pop music aren’t sure how to deal with the anti-patriarchal female sexuality presented by Gaga, while Swift and Perry both cling to socially accepted perspectives.⁵³ The blog for the renowned feminist publication, Ms. Magazine, uses Gaga’s own words to quote the way feminists, and I believe popular music audiences as a whole, grapple with Lady Gaga as a pop star, sexual being, and possible role model: “We’re in a Bad Romance.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ “Did You Forget You’re a Role Model, Katy Perry?” *Feminist Fatale*, June 19, 2010, www.feministfatale.com/2010/06/did-you-forget-youre-a-role-model-katy-perry/, accessed May 5, 2012.

⁵² “Feminism, Sex, and Lady Gaga,” *Feminist Fatale*, April 12, 2010, www.feministfatale.com/2010/04/feminism-sex-and-lady-gaga

⁵³ It should be said, however, that all of these women specifically in these videos are only addressing heterosexual and cisgender sexual expression. Whether empowering to women or not, they do not represent sexualities outside of their own experiences, which is problematic in and of itself.

⁵⁴ Noelle Williams, “Is Lady Gaga a Feminist or Isn’t She?” *Ms. Magazine Blog*, March 11, 2010, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2010/03/11/is-lady-gaga-a-feminist-or-isnt-she/>, accessed May 4, 2012.

CHAPTER II: LADY GAGA AND POP CULTURE EXPRESSIONS OF FEMINISM

“I’m a Free Bitch”

-Lady Gaga, “Dance in the Dark,” *The Fame Monster*.

On her 2009 album *The Fame Monster*, Lady Gaga introduced the self-descriptive term “Free Bitch” to millions. Although Gaga’s expression of third wave feminism may not always fall within the conventions of the movement, many fans view her words as a model for their gender empowerment. In this chapter I will address how and why Little Monsters are exposed to, and ultimately, perform feminist concepts such as sex positivity and female collectivity through Lady Gaga’s body of work.

It is important to first explore how Gaga herself has approached accusations of feminism and anti-feminism from the public. In a now infamous 2009 interview with a Norwegian reporter, Gaga is quoted as saying “I’m not a feminist. I hail men, I love men!”⁵⁵ This interview, save for a few short youtube clips, has since disappeared from the internet. The 2009 version of Gaga buys into the unfortunate stereotypes of feminism, of man-hating and power grabbing, something many young and impressionable women do. Many feminists found this gaffe especially damaging, as it perpetuated stereotypes of feminism and feminists. However, Gaga seems to have learned more about the subject since this misrepresentation, and her opinions have evolved. In December of 2009 the singer claimed she was “a little bit of a feminist,”⁵⁶ a stance that only lasted until May of 2010, when she was interviewed by the fashion film studio and

⁵⁵ This quote can be found all over the web, and is cited, however the links are no longer available. These quotes can be found in the post “Free Bitch Feminism: The Post-Gender of Lady Gaga” on the Lady Gaga themed blog, *Gaga Stigmata*, as well as in a mashup of interviews in a video entitled “Lady Gaga is Not a Feminist. Lady Gaga is a Feminist” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEiwSDiEG74.

⁵⁶ Ann Powers, “Frank Talk with Lady Gaga,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2009.

website SHOWstudio. In this interview, Gaga was asked if her extreme appearance was reactionary in nature. She answered:

Yes. Yes I am. I am a feminist. I reject wholeheartedly the way we are taught to perceive women. The beauty of women, how a woman should act or behave. Women are strong and fragile. Women are beautiful and ugly. We are soft spoken and loud, all at once. There is something mind-controlling about the way we're taught to view women. My work, both visually and musically, is a rejection of all those things. And most importantly a quest. It's exciting because all avant-garde clothing and music and lyrics that at one time were considered shocking or unacceptable are now trendy. Perhaps we can make women's rights trendy. Strength, feminism, security, the wisdom of the woman. Let's make that trendy.⁵⁷

Here Gaga lets go of her previous antifeminist statement. She embraces the concepts and ideals of feminism, claiming that her work itself is a feminist expression, one that she hopes to perpetuate and “make trendy.” It appears that Gaga’s own definition of feminism has evolved from buying into media stereotypes, to understanding feminism in more of the second wave women’s rights perspective, and finally to a third wave inclusive feminism working to change media representations of females and other oppressed peoples.

Unfortunately popular culture and popular musicians most often come with excess baggage. Lady Gaga’s baggage becomes quite evident when looking into her biography. Gaga, who was raised in an upper middle class home in New York City and attended a well-known private school, is not without privilege. She is white, well educated, and thin. She has lived a seemingly happy and family oriented life. Gaga’s privilege could easily make her brand of feminism not inclusive to women outside her personal demographic. Ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Keenan addresses the use of popular music as a basis for ideological beliefs in her article “If Liz Phair’s Exile in Guyville Made You a Feminist, What Kind of Feminist Are You? Heterosexuality, Race, and Class in the Third Wave.” As the title suggests, Keenan discusses

⁵⁷ “In Camera- Lady Gaga,” *SHOWstudio*, May 2010. http://showstudio.com/project/in_camera/session/lady_gaga. Accessed May 10, 2012.

how although Liz Phair's album *Exile in Guyville* worked as a feminist text for many young women, Phair's white, heterosexual, middle class background made her feminism somewhat limiting.⁵⁸ The same could easily be said about Lady Gaga's presentations of feminism. She holds similar privilege to Phair, with the exception of her sexuality. As a self-identified bisexual, Gaga does not conform to the heterosexual sense of privilege claimed by Phair, a type of privilege often unrecognized by early second wave feminism, and criticized by third wavers. Gaga, as a proponent of third wave feminism and as a recognizer of her own privilege, seeks to be inclusive with her feminist stance. The 2011 album *Born This Way*, as well as the eponymous first single, are imbued with third wave discourses of empowerment, inclusion, and self-love. Gaga addresses a variety of sexualities, genders, and ethnicities in order to meet her goal of inclusivity and remove her own privilege from the spotlight.

Lady Gaga's Body of Work as Feminist Text

Her status as an extraordinarily famous pop star allows Lady Gaga to express and communicate concepts and convictions such as feminism and LGBTQ rights to an extremely wide audience. Because popular music is often seen as inferior to other forms of music and lacking in value, Gaga's ability to create a meaningful text is often underestimated. In the book *Feminism, Femininities and Popular Culture*, media scholar Joanne Hollows states that pop music is often "associated with 'feminine' characteristics" and has "received little serious attention," pointing out that women in mainstream genres are only afforded legitimacy if they are associated with more "masculine" forms such as rock or hip hop.⁵⁹ In the book *Gender Politics*

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Keenan, "If Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville* Made You a Feminist, What Kind of Feminist Are You? Heterosexuality, Race, and Class in the Third Wave," *Women and Music* 14, 2010.

⁵⁹ Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininities and Popular Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), 186.

and MTV: *Voicing the Difference*, Lisa Lewis addresses the perceived inferiority of popular music as compared to other genres. Lewis states that rock was “made to stand as a higher form of popular music,” and that pop, because of its connection with commercialism, is “deemed trivial and unworthy of critical attention” and pop musicians are “denied the status of artists because of their association with extreme popularity and commercial success.”⁶⁰ Although Gaga can communicate these messages and ideologies, she is not taken seriously by many and is often criticized for producing thoughtless pop.⁶¹ When discussing Madonna, whose legacy made Gaga’s career possible, feminist musicologist Susan McClary argued that:

Her music deliberately aims at a wide popular audience rather than at those who pride themselves on their elite aesthetic discrimination. Her enormous commercial success is often held against her, as evidence that she plays for the lowest common denominator—that she prostitutes her art (and, by extension, herself). Moreover, the fact that her music appeals to masses of young girls is usually taken as proof that the music has absolutely no substance, for females in our culture are generally thought to be incapable of understanding music on even a rudimentary level.⁶²

McClary asserts, similarly to Hollows and Lewis, that popular music, and its association with the feminine, is viewed as lacking substance. However, McClary also reasons that through this mass popularity a pop star has the ability to galvanize an audience, and work as a powerful figure in cultural politics. Madonna, and now Gaga, utilize the medium of mass distributed popular music to subvert these accusations of thoughtlessness and provoke audiences into political action. These two artists recognize the oppressively patriarchal associations of popular music with both the feminine and the simple, and work to undermine them. Through the sole act of performing

⁶⁰ Lisa Lewis, *Gender and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1991), 29.

⁶¹ This is discussed in many reviews of Lady Gaga, including one entitled “Lady Gaga is Mindless, Raunchy Fun” by the Canadian website *Straight.com*, and this is a line I often hear when discussing Lady Gaga with those who aren’t fans of her music.

⁶² Susan McClary, “Living to Tell: Madonna’s Resurrection of the Fleshly,” in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 154.

popular music with any sort of embedded meaning, in Gaga's case feminism, she is breaking free of popular prejudice and working to liberate a "female" genre from its negative stereotypes.

Although Gaga's positions on feminism have publicly evolved over the last few years, she has consistently presented concepts and themes that can be interpreted as projecting feminist ideas. Each of her last two albums, *The Fame Monster* and *Born This Way*, have featured songs with texts that undoubtedly represent ideas of liberating women from a patriarchal society. The songs "Dance in the Dark" and "Sheiße" are explicit declamations of female empowerment. The pieces "Bad Romance" and "Born This Way" also possess feminist undertones, but will not be addressed here due to their discussion in other parts of this thesis.

Female Collectivity and Celebrity Iconography in "Dance in the Dark"

"Dance in the Dark," a b-side from Gaga's sophomore album, *The Fame Monster*, opens with Gaga reciting that she is a free bitch, a phrase also utilized in the song "Bad Romance." The concept of being a free bitch has been hashed over by critics, fans, and feminists alike. There are many elements presented within the concept of being a free bitch. To take the term literally, we start with the straightforward "free" or liberated, and then add "bitch," in simple and non-connotative terms, a reference for a female. In this sense Gaga is simply projecting her freeness as a woman. However, she could also be using the word "bitch" as a re-appropriation of a condescending, female exclusive word.

In the book *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, sociologist Miriam Meyerhoff asserts that sociocultural hierarchies are constructed and naturalized through the repeated use of words with negative connotations, i.e. bitch. She goes on to say that positively redefining language with negative connotations challenges the legitimacy of those using the language as an oppressive

tool, and helps to destabilize hegemonic authority.⁶³ “Free bitch” does precisely that. Gaga takes a word normally used with damaging intent and combines it with the word “free,” turning it into a positive descriptor. How can a term be negative if it is free, unattached? The combination of the word “free” allows Gaga to manipulate the meaning of “bitch.” “Bitch,” a female specific insult, is utilized as an oppressive term to most often describe a woman who speaks without fear of consequence and who perhaps moves out of specified zone of politeness women are most often relegated to in patriarchal societies. When discussing the lexicography of the term, Beverley Gross argues that “its meaning matters less than its power to denounce and subjugate.”⁶⁴ She goes on to conclude that “bitch means to men whatever they find threatening in a woman, and means to women whatever they particularly dislike about themselves. In either case the word functions as a misogynistic club.”⁶⁵ It is used as a tool to oppress and belittle women, from a more powerful standpoint. “Bitch” implies a lower standing in some socio-cultural context, whether it be education, class, or behavior. Gaga takes a term used to denigrate her in the past, and reclaims it, in turn reclaiming power from those who have previously used it to belittle her.

Gaga’s fans clearly articulated ideas of power reclamation when asked what they felt the true meaning of being a free bitch was:

I think it’s a symbol of her authority and dominance, that she has no one ruling over her... She is truly free to live the life she wants [to] live... The use of the word ‘bitch’ is more edgy than using ‘woman’ or something similar because in many senses, the word describes her better. It’s bad, offensive to some, rebel-ish and maybe discourteous... [It shows] Gaga’s lack of fear to be the raw, strong, bitch that she is.⁶⁶

⁶³ Miriam Meyerhoff, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 64.

⁶⁴ Beverly Gross, “Bitch,” *Salmagundi* 103, 1994: 147.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁶ Amethyst, online interview with author, May 11, 2012.

The fan continues: “She may see it [being a bitch] as a negative but isn’t going to deny being a bitch and through admitting that, it becomes a positive.”⁶⁷ The fan in question, who goes by the handle Amethyst, is quite articulate in her concept of being a free bitch. Amethyst, a young English woman, sees being “bad” and “offensive” as a way to project strength and authority. She takes the original connotation of the word “bitch,” and transforms it into a positive and empowering phrase. Being a free bitch is being and expressing your true self, even if others might view that self negatively, and empowering yourself through those expressions. Another fan, Melissa, approached the term in a similar manner:

The term “free bitch” is a reclaim of the word of bitch for women. Like many other marginalized groups, Gaga is taking back the word “bitch” and rewriting its meaning to empower woman... She is basically saying, “It’s okay to be a strong woman. It’s okay to be a bitch.” When it’s coupled with “free” she is symbolically releasing bitches from their chains of oppression.⁶⁸

Melissa recognized the use of the term “bitch” as a reclamation, and similarly to Amethyst, as a transformative and newly positive turn of phrase.

The bridge of “Dance in the Dark” also conveys ideas of empowerment, this time through female collectivity and powerful association with celebrity icons. Gaga recites names of females who were chastised for their sexual presentations, specifically strong female symbols in the American cultural imagination, although in extraordinarily different ways. Gaga declaims:

Marilyn / Judy / Sylvia / Tell them how you feel girls / Work your blonde Benet Ramsey / We’ll haunt like Liberace / Find your freedom in the music / Find your Jesus / Find your Kubrick / You will never fall apart Diana / You’re still in our hearts / Never let you fall apart / Together we’ll dance in the dark.⁶⁹

This quote addresses five women who, although deceased, maintain strong cultural representations of varying types of womanhood. They represent five tragic tropes of female

⁶⁷ Amethyst, online interview with author, May 11, 2012.

⁶⁸ Melissa Marra, online interview with author, May 13, 2012.

⁶⁹ Lady Gaga, “Dance in the Dark,” *The Fame Monster* (Interscope Records, 2009).

strength, all coming together as a platform for female empowerment. First Gaga mentions Marilyn Monroe, a mid-twentieth century sexual icon whose death remains a mystery but is publicly accepted as suicide. Next is Judy Garland, one of the most well-known American actresses and singers of the earlier twentieth and icon for the gay community, who perished as a result of a self-induced accidental drug overdose. The third name called is Sylvia Plath, renowned American poet and intellectual whose work is often interpreted as having feminist undertones, and who infamously took her own life. JonBenét Ramsey is referenced next, a toddler beauty queen who was tragically murdered at the age of six; whose killer is still unknown. Finally Gaga addresses Diana, Princess of Wales, the most celebrated princess of the late twentieth century, who was killed in an automobile accident after being chased down by paparazzi. These five women led what can only be known as tragically spectacular lives, cut short by patriarchally oppressive societies. In their lives they were celebrities, through their deaths they become icons of female freedom. However, these concepts of freedom are twisted representations of the fate that can befall women in an oppressive society, and assume death as plausible escape from the constraints of a tortured life.

Although Gaga works to recognize her own privilege, in the instance of the females mentioned in “Dance in the Dark,” she unfortunately exercises it unknowingly. All of the aforementioned women are Caucasian. This clearly demonstrates, similarly to Keenan’s discussion of Phair, a white centric view of feminism by not allowing space for the names of nonwhite women.

According to sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander, the celebrity icon, and specifically the female celebrity icon, works as a sign, “a totemic symbol,”⁷⁰ portraying mythical characters in which fact and fiction are blurred in order to create and communicate a desired expression of

⁷⁰ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “The Celebrity Icon,” *Cultural Sociology* 4, 2010: 329.

power. The faults and realities of these celebrated female figures are forgiven in order for them to become apotheosized. They become representative of female strength, of beauty, intellect, and consequence. In the context of “Dance in the Dark” they are seen as mythical goddesses, unifying women everywhere. Gaga calls their names as if invoking them to collectively unify womankind: “together we’ll dance in the dark.”

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Gaga described “Dance in the Dark” as a critique on the innate insecurities placed on women by the media. She argues that in today’s society, sex is associated with “a man’s power, and women are taught to be receivers... it’s just a very deluded way of looking at sex.”⁷¹ She fleshes out the meaning of the song by claiming that women often have to “dance in the dark” in order to be free from the physical stigma and oppression surrounding the female body.

The six celebrity icons conjured by Gaga are symbolically representative of female power, and in death have become “free bitches.” Their legacies are no longer tied to the actuality of the lives they led. They are no longer tied to the patriarchal society that once oppressed them, and consequently cut their lives short. All but JonBenét, who was unfortunately a sexualized being in her own right, are celebrated as powerful women who expressed themselves, both personally and/or sexually, in a way that did not conform to oppressive misogynist ideals. Marilyn, one of Gaga’s influences and referenced in other areas of her work, is the quintessential blonde bombshell, constantly projecting extreme sexuality in a way that men could relate to. She represented the feminine in all of its patriarchal conformity, yet never projected her own sense of agency.⁷² She was controlled and objectified because of her feminine sexuality, leaving suicide as her only escape. Gaga calls on Marilyn and her lack of agency elsewhere, in order to

⁷¹ Ann Powers, “Gaga Wisdom: Words from the Lady, Part 2,” *The L.A. Times Music Blog*, December 15, 2012. latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2009/12/gaga-.html

⁷² Georges-Claude Guilbert, *Madonna as Postmodern Myth*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2002), 142.

manipulate the oppression of sexualized feminine women, something I will address later in this chapter. Diana was quite literally driven to her death because of the public obsession with her life. Paparazzi were so eager to get a picture of the Princess that they pursued her recklessly. Gaga tells JonBenét to “work her blonde,” to do what she was known for in life, to exude the extremes of femininity. Postmortem the child beauty queen is allowed to freely be what she was so harshly judged for in life. Previously mentioned Little Monster Melissa gathers a similar message from the piece. When asked what she believed the significance of the five names were, she said:

I believe she says those names as a way of honoring those [who] have died at the hands of sexism, and also exposes the hideous consequences of objectifying women and over sexualizing them. I think it also speaks to her larger message about fame and the media and their destructive nature.⁷³

Here, Melissa recognizes that patriarchal oppression eventually took the lives of each and every one of these females. She also identifies Gaga’s message of media based misogyny.

Working parallel to the idea of critiquing destructive patriarchal social structures, Gaga also presents an idea of sex positivity in “Dance in the Dark.” Recalling the quote about sexual power hierarchies, Gaga states that men are the power holders when it comes to expressions and performances of sexuality. Pro-sex feminism, a late second wave and third wave concept, is addressed by Judith Butler in the 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. Butler states that sex positive feminism argues that sexuality is a construction of patriarchal discourse and that all forms of sexuality are constructed through terms of heterosexual masculine power hierarchies. She continues:

If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is ‘before,’ ‘outside,’ or ‘beyond’ power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and

⁷³ Melissa, online interview with author, May 15, 2012.

identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement.”⁷⁴

Pro-sex feminism, according to Butler, takes as its basis a heterosexual hegemonic understanding of sex and sexuality, but rather than replicating the terms of patriarchally constructed sexuality, it subverts them in order to displace misogynist power hierarchies. In her brief commentary on the track, Gaga addresses theories of displacing normative power relationships in favor for a more liberated version of female sexuality.

Overall, “Dance in the Dark” expresses many concepts of female empowerment and liberation in its brief four minutes and fifty seconds. Through this one singular piece Gaga critiques normative structures of patriarchally based sexuality, and invokes the concept of female collectivity. She calls for the freedom of womankind through concepts of sex positivity and undermining patriarchal control over female sexuality.

Female Power Without the “Scheiße”

Gaga’s 2011 album, *Born This Way*, is abundant with messages of self-acceptance and non-prejudice. The track “Scheiße” approaches this subject from a decidedly feminist perspective. “Scheiße” is much more of a straightforward feminist text than “Dance in the Dark,” and works as a commentary on patriarchal perceptions of powerful women. Third wave feminism hinges on discourses of empowerment, an ever present subject in Gaga’s body of work, and is explicitly manifested in “Scheiße.” The piece opens with a gibberish, faux German recitation. Gaga has commented that the gibberish touted in the introduction and bridge of “Scheiße” is representative of what she hears when people interfere with her strength as a

⁷⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 41.

woman.⁷⁵ Perhaps she uses German, often heard by Americans as a strong and/or abrasive language, to further her point.

She begins the first verse by commenting on the expectations of women in an oppressive society, and how being expected to say or do whatever “you” (you being men) like, is scheiße, or shit in the German language.

“I’ll take you out tonight / Say whatever you like / Scheiße Scheiße be mine / Scheiße be mine / Put on a show tonight / Do whatever you like/ Scheiße Scheiße be mine/ Scheiße be mine.”⁷⁶

She continues: “When I’m on a mission / I rebuke my condition / If you’re a strong female / You don’t need permission,” and that she wishes she could “be strong without the Scheiße.” She rebukes her condition, being a female in a misogynistic culture, in order to be strong and live her life to her own expectations, yet realizes that doing so, and acting as a strong women may get her in trouble.

The second verse of the song divulges clearly Gaga’s previously conflicted stance as a feminist:

Love is objectified by what men say is right / Scheiße Scheiße be mine / Bullshit be mine / Blonde high heeled feminist / enlisting femmes for this / Express your women kind fight for your rights.

Here Gaga explicitly addresses ideas of an oppressive and male centered society, and how, yet again, it’s bullshit. Love, of any kind, is only legitimate if it is recognized as such by a man. She calls herself a “blonde high heeled feminist” enlisting “femmes” such as herself to fight for the rights of women.

The term femme is described in the Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender as a gender queer expression of extreme femininity, adopted “as a powerful and theatrical style of gender that

⁷⁵ <http://www.ladygaga.com/Default.aspx#!tweets-official>

⁷⁶ Lady Gaga, “Scheiße,” *Born This Way*, Interscope Records, 2011.

emphasizes agency, independence... and feminine strength.”⁷⁷ The anthology *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls* addresses “femme” as “a critical approach to femininity” that is “transgressive, disruptive, and chosen,” as well as “subversive and empowering.”⁷⁸ This idea of the femme can easily be applied to Lady Gaga’s flamboyant, ultra feminized physical aesthetic. She wears practically nothing while teetering in ten inch platforms, dons elaborate blonde wigs and heaps of makeup. Gaga plays into ideas of femininity and expected female appearances in a transgressive and subversive manner. She exaggerates her femininity as an expression of her own agency, harkening back to the ideas of being a “free bitch.”

It is worth noting that neither of these tracks have been released as singles, demonstrating that songs with feminist undertones may not be seen as profitable, and although Gaga discusses ideas of empowerment in other examples of her work, “Dance in the Dark” and “Sheiße” are the two most overt expressions of feminism in her catalog. They celebrate female agency and empowerment through ideas of reclamation, collectivity, and subversive identities. She does, however capitalize on the publicity created by her more public gender deconstructions, which are extremely attention grabbing.

Subverting Heteropatriarchal Norms in Public Appearances

Outside of her music, Gaga has also worked to disrupt misogyny and heteropatriarchal norms through her appearances in mass media. She not only exaggerates her femininity as a tool of subversion but also utilizes drag as a way to disrupt gender based power hierarchies. In this section I will address how Lady Gaga performs multiple personas in order to undermine what is expected of a popular musician and how, through these personas, she embodies feminist thought.

⁷⁷ Jamie Hovey, “Femme,” *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, Ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 543-544.

⁷⁸ Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

The first and most obvious of Gaga's embodied feminisms is Lady Gaga herself, as the femme. As the femme, Gaga dons elaborate wigs, usually of some shade of blonde, and exaggerated makeup. Her elaborate get-ups are often criticized as being too over the top and too revealing. For example, she appeared on the televised singing competition *American Idol* in the spring of 2011, to the dismay of many fans of *Idol*, wearing her signature heavy makeup and outlandish wig, little clothing, and shoes with six inch phalluses for heels. Many viewers deemed her too inappropriate for *Idol*, a program intended for families with a large demographic of young viewers, and as nothing but "shock-value smut."⁷⁹ Femme Gaga takes the expected blonde pop star image, and exaggerates it grotesquely until it is almost no longer visible.

However, utilizing the femme, although undermining heteronormativity, can have consequences. The exaggeration of traditional femininity can also be damaging, if not viewed through a critical lens of subversive identity politics. The femme can be seen as conforming the female body to hegemonic expectations. Critics often see Gaga as perpetuating damaging representations of women. One commentator described Gaga as "further entrenching stereotypes about women and sexuality," and that her "dyed hair, crazy costumes, pornographic accoutrements, pelvic thrusting and grinding" market the degradation of women.⁸⁰ Rather than being viewed as working to dismantle patriarchal standards, Gaga is by some seen as reinforcing them.

Figure one, taken at the 2010 Grammy Awards, depicts Gaga as her femme persona. Her big blonde and yellow hair combined with her bright pink lipstick gave her an almost Barbie-esque quality. This ultra girly image is furthered with a glittery pink dress, somewhat reminiscent of Glinda the Good. Her body is covered in rhinestones, as are her shoes, which are no shorter

⁷⁹ "Lady Gaga Pushes to the Edge on 'American Idol' Finale and Jumps," *NJ.com*, May 26, 2011. Comment section.

⁸⁰ Melinda Tankard Reist, "The Activist," *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, July 16, 2011.

than six inches. In this appearance, Gaga manipulates the typical red carpet experience, throwing in glitz and camp in place of a more traditional Hollywood glamour. Harris and Crocker posit that “femme sexual politics provide a liberatory model... for women in general,” and that “femmes, through a reshaped femininity, exhibit an assertive sexuality that does not conflate desire with political practice.”⁸¹ Gaga appropriates and reshapes accepted norms of femininity in order to assertively express a form of liberated sexual politics.

Gaga’s exaggerated femininity draws directly from the historical trajectory of femme celebrities. Her predecessors have paved the way for expectations of female celebrities, as well as manipulations of those expectations. Gaga draws specifically from Marilyn Monroe and Madonna in her presentation of the femme. Monroe exhibited what has become the standard for female celebrities, the buxom blonde who is perceived as sexually available without actually being available. She is the original femme without the subversive identity politics. She oozes sexuality and feminine naivety all at once. According to Georges-Claude Guilbert, Marilyn is “basically no more than a very sexy small-town girl-next-door,” exploited and powerless, desired by everyone, yet suffering and lacking control of her life.⁸² Madonna drew inspiration directly from Monroe, yet manipulated the image in order to comment on misogynist gender politics in American culture. Madonna parodies Monroe in a way that demonstrates her own agency. Guilbert asserts that Madonna “is not content merely aping her [Monroe],” but that she “shows her difference inside the very pastiche.”⁸³ She directly parodies Monroe in her music videos, though plays with the image, distorting it to reveal her own agency while undermining the very girl-next-door sexuality that made Monroe famous. Madonna frequently mimics Monroe in an

⁸¹ Harris and Crocker, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, 3.

⁸² Guilbert, *Madonna as Postmodern Myth*, 142.

⁸³ Guilbert, *Madonna as Postmodern Myth*, 143.

ironic manner, calling on Monroe's sex appeal and lack of agency, manipulating them in slight ways in order to subvert normative gender politics.

Gaga draws on Madonna's parody of Monroe, as well as the tragedy of Monroe herself. She spoke of the actress in "Dance in the Dark," and often mimics her sartorial choices. Similarly to Madonna, Gaga does not simply replicate Monroe's (or Madonna's) aesthetics, she manipulates them to reveal her own parodic subversion of the femme character. Exaggerated femininity and uncovered female bodies are often viewed as lewd and offensive. At the same time her femininity is perceived socioculturally to be a weakness. Gaga's pastiche of Monroe is extremely reminiscent of Madonna's, and functions through the same framework of ironic parody, mimicking something perceived as weak and/or inappropriate in order to make a statement. The imitation of Madonna is at times perceived as a weakness in itself, often being seen as unoriginal and redundant.⁸⁴

Gaga's femme performance, like many images of the uncovered female body, is seen as lewd and inappropriate. In the ensemble Gaga wore to the Grammy Awards (pictured below), many felt it was tacky that you could see her wig line, and inappropriate that the dress was so short in the front. Her Barbie like make-up was trans*phobically⁸⁵ labeled "tranny like," implying an exaggerated femininity so ridiculously excessive it could not have been done by a biological female. Flaunting the fact that she's wearing a wig furthers her cause of the subversive femme. She makes it known that this level of femininity is naturally unattainable and false. Gaga, who once referred to this ensemble as "ironic," exaggerates her feminine appearance and

⁸⁴ The blog "Paws Down Lil' Monster" (pawsdownlilmonsters.tumblr.com) and the comment section of the video for "Born This Way" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw>) are just a small example of the large number of blogs, comments, and articles that reflect this sentiment.

⁸⁵ The asterisk in the term "trans*" is meant to represent a variety of gender identities outside of the traditional gender binary. It can represent transgender, transvestite, genderqueer, and intersex identities, as well as any other non-binary gender identity.

in doing so uncovers and critiques oppressive standards of beauty. In the essay “Memory, Monsters, and Lady Gaga,” Victor P. Corona suggests that Gaga’s work “reflects a desire to tinker with the aesthetic power of the core symbols of American culture.”⁸⁶

Gaga often refers to her expression of the femme as “drag,” insinuating that she interprets it as a performance. Butler addresses the concept of drag as a “subversive bodily act,” and that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself.”⁸⁷ If, according to Butler, the meanings of gender are clearly constructed through hegemonic and misogynistic cultural acts and practices, then drag is a “parodic recontextualization” that causes a displacement, mobilization, and denaturalization of those constructions.⁸⁸ Although Gaga identifies as a female, her conceptualization of the femme as a sort of gender parody allows it to function, in Butler’s words, as a “subversive bodily act.”⁸⁹

While in this femme persona, Gaga often sports a brassiere based apparatus constructed of either semi-automatic military weapons or conical shaped pyrotechnics, not subtly based on Madonna’s Gaultier creation. This is demonstrated in figure 2, a photograph taken at a 2011 leg of her Monster Ball Tour, as promotional stills for an HBO special. Here, Gaga is still in the femme persona, as she almost always is during live performances, however she accessorizes her usual exaggerated femininity with her flame bra, and although it cannot be seen in this photograph, a pelvic pyrotechnic is worn as well. Gaga is making a connection between violence, femme expression, and the female body. With the pyrotechnic genitalia, Gaga makes her body even more offensive, while using the pieces of her body that tie her to both lewdness and weakness as a weapon.

⁸⁶ Victor P. Corona, “Memory, Monsters, and Lady Gaga,” 7.

⁸⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

Figure 1⁹⁰

Figure 2

A second embodiment of feminism and the deconstruction of normative gender politics is her male alter ego, Jo Calderone. Calderone was first seen publicly in the September 2010 issue of *Vogues Hommes Japan*, in which Gaga both interviewed and was photographed in this persona. In this interview, Jo was presented as a typically masculine man, mostly talking about cars and being a mechanic.

He was absent from Gaga's career until August of 2011, when he was featured in her video for the single "Yoü and I." Calderone's most public outing, however, occurred at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards. Although Lady Gaga was scheduled to open the ceremony, when the curtains rose, there was Calderone. Smoking a cigarette, he ranted about Gaga for two and half minutes, and then proceeded to perform "Yoü and I." He talked about how over the top

⁹⁰ Image courtesy of *Huffington Post Online*.

Gaga's appearance was, how crazy her wigs were, and how she, being the ultimate femme, never took off her high heels. He references Gaga as an ex-lover, claiming that her whole life is such a facade, that she must cover her face during sexual climax. He says that Gaga is a performance, and she tells him "Jo, I'm not real. I'm theater."⁹¹ Calderone wears black tuxedo pants, a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and slick black hair. His image is a compilation of stereotypically masculine things, he is not reflecting a specific man, but a culturally constructed presumption of what "masculine" should be. Through her performance as Calderone, Gaga was able to critique herself and her over the top femininity, all the while explaining that her entire public life is a performance. When discussing Jo Calderone in an interview with the Huffington Post, Gaga asserted that "reading Jo in any kind of way is a fair reading. The performance of Jo is meant to manipulate the visualization of gender in as many ways as I possibly could," and she goes so far as to imply that he may be a transgendered man.⁹² Therefore she can be read as a man, who may or may not have been born a female, and who critiques heteropatriarchal gender constructs. She directly points to hegemonic and repressive gender roles and proceeds to undermine them.

In the book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam addresses the phenomena of the drag king, or someone who "performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act."⁹³ Gaga, through Jo, and especially through Jo's hyper-masculine characteristics, exposes the theatricality of masculinity, similar to her performance of the hyper-feminine femme.

⁹¹ "Lady Gaga Bends Gender, Minds With VMA Monologues," *MTV.com*, August 28, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1669859/lady-gaga-jo-calderone-video-music-awards.jhtml>, accessed May 14, 2012.

⁹² Noah Michelson, "Lady Gaga Discusses Activism, Outing and Reading Her Male Alter Ego, Jo Calderone, as a Transgender Man," *Huffington Post*, October 3, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/23/lady-gaga-jo-calderone-transgender_n_978063.html, accessed May 14, 2012.

⁹³ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), 232.

Much of what Gaga does, including her femme and drag appearances, can be interpreted as camp. Jack Babuscio's essay "Camp and the Gay Sensibility" in the edited volume *Camp Grounds* outlines four essential features of camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor, all of which are embraced by femme Gaga and Calderone. The exaggerations of both femininity and masculinity are ironic, or as Babuscio describes, an "incongruous contrast between an individual thing and its context or association."⁹⁴ A woman performing as a man is an obvious incongruity between individual and context, and presenting herself via the femme as a drag queen also presents an incongruous contrast. Both the aestheticism and theatricality of camp are presented through the sartorial and physical appearances of Gaga as the femme or as Jo. Similarly the theatricality of camp is performed through the persona embodied by Jo. Jo is over the top, abrasive, and almost unbelievable in his masculinity. By not conforming to what is expected of her, Gaga's performance is always theatrical and campy. The humor of camp, as described by Babuscio, is a chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation.⁹⁵ Jo is viewed as humorous because he is in contrast with what the audience expects from Gaga. Camp is most often associated with homosexuality. Therefore, Gaga's campy performances further work to expose and critique gender and sexuality hierarchies.

Gaga's performance of an alter ego is also not without precedence, and doesn't exist in a vacuum. Many pop stars today, including Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Eminem have all assumed alternative personas. Additionally, legendary rocker David Bowie, whom Gaga always names as a major influence, is well known for his androgynous alter ego, Ziggy Stardust. Throughout her career, Gaga has been both visually and sonically influenced by Bowie, and often wore a Stardust inspired lightning bolt of glitter over her eye early on in her career. She specifically

⁹⁴ Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

named him as an influence during an interview in late 2009.⁹⁶ The performance of Jo Calderone is a clear connection between Bowie and Gaga. Stardust is even more outlandish and exuberant than Bowie, and is referred to as extraterrestrial, bisexual, and transgendered.⁹⁷ Performance studies scholar Philip Auslander references Judith Butler in his analysis of Ziggy Stardust, aligning him with Butler's theories of gender parody as subversion. He states that Bowie performs "hyperbolic male heterosexuality to the point of hysteria" through a non-heterosexual framework.⁹⁸ It seems as though Gaga is drawing on the gender parody of Stardust for her own performance of Calderon. As a male, Calderon is heterosexual, publicly discussing his heterosexual acts. Calderon, like Stardust, performs male heterosexuality within a non-heterosexual frame. Gaga as Calderon performs an exaggerated male heterosexuality outside its normal framework. Auslander suggests that Bowie as Stardust emphasizes "the socially constructed status of gay sexual identities" and raises questions about the socio-cultural norms in which these behaviors are constructed and policed,⁹⁹ ideas that Gaga directly parallels when performing as Calderone.

Gaga also draws her performance of the masculine from Annie Lennox. Lennox is well known for her play with androgyny and her gender bending fashion. Sheila Whiteley's essay "Challenging the Feminine: Annie Lennox, Androgynicity, and Illusions of Identity" outlines Lennox's queering of gender. Lennox often sported a slicked back, short hair style, one that Gaga's performance of Calderone could easily be referencing, and a suit intended for men. Whiteley asserts that these aesthetic choices allow Lennox to "gain access to the male domain of

⁹⁶ "11.07.2009 News: The Lady is Gaga for Bowie," *DavidBowie.com*, November 7, 2009, www.davidbowie.com/news/index.php?id=20091107, accessed July 20, 2012.

⁹⁷ Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 126.

⁹⁸ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*, 138.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

artistic control,”¹⁰⁰ something that might also be said of Gaga. Lennox also performed in drag at the 1984 Grammy Awards, complete with Elvis like sideburns, clearly setting a precedent for Gaga’s award show drag. Prior to the Grammy performance, Lennox’s performances of androgyny and drag had caused such a stir that she was asked to provide documentation that she was, in fact, biologically female.¹⁰¹ Gaga’s rumored status as transgender also harkens back to Lennox, and it could be argued that both of the artists were only giving audiences what they had been suggesting all along. Lennox, however, only appeared visually as a man, while Gaga performed the whole ceremony as a man. This only follows suit with the rest of Gaga’s career: she borrows from and parodies her influences, but manipulates the original to create her own meaning.

Through Jo Calderone, Gaga is performing gender through drag. Recalling Butler’s aforementioned explanation of gender parody, the performance of Calderone reveals the imitative nature of gender and exposes the societal construction of gender through the platform of mass media. He accepted the MTV Video Music Award for Best Female Video on behalf of its true recipient, Lady Gaga, during his August 2011 outing. Staying in character the entire time, Calderone asserted Gaga’s “Born This Way” message, the song for which the award was won.¹⁰² The paradox of Gaga as Calderone accepting the award for Best Female while maintaining the “born this way” philosophy is indicative of Gaga’s purposeful displacement, mobilization, and recontextualization of the hegemonic gender binary.

¹⁰⁰ Sheila Whiteley, “Challenging the Feminine: Annie Lennox, Androgynosity, and Illusions of Identity,” in *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*, New York: Routledge (2001): 123.

¹⁰¹ Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*, 138

¹⁰² ‘Lady Gaga’s Jo Calderone Alter Ego Accepts Best Female Video VMA,’ *MTV.com*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1669863/lady-gaga-best-female-video-vmas.jhtml>, accessed July 12, 2012.

Figure 3¹⁰³

At the same time, Gaga's performance of Jo Calderone addresses rumors from the beginning of her career that she was biologically male. At first Gaga embraced this rumor and may have even helped perpetuate it, allowing some to call her a post-gender icon. However, after a short period of embracing the rumor that she may be transgender, she took to Twitter, letting the world know that her "beautiful vagina" was offended by the suggestion. Although this may have helped to clear up the initial rumor, it also offended the trans* community. Similarly, her performance of Calderone is often viewed by the trans* community as a sort of appropriation.¹⁰⁴ Although publicly subverting the gender binary through drag is a large step for pop culture, Gaga may not be entirely aware of the oppression of the trans* community and the way her actions can

¹⁰³ Cover, *Vogue Hommes Japan*, September 2010.

¹⁰⁴ This is a sentiment addressed on many trans* themed blogs, including an entry on the blog *DizzyPie.tumblr.com*, and the comment sections of a multitude of articles on Gaga's drag performance, including a comment by reader on the previously cited Huffington Post article, "Lady Gaga Discusses Activism, Outing, and Reading Her Male Alter Ego, Jo Calderone, as a Transgender Man," that simply stated "wow, I feel appropriated."

be viewed as appropriative. This is another moment in Gaga's career where, although no harm may be intended, she inadvertently exercises her privilege, in this case as a cisgender female.

Little Monster Feminism

Many Little Monsters are self-proclaimed feminists. A large amount of those feminist Monsters either attribute their feminism to Gaga, or claim she helped further their preexisting feminist beliefs. On the Lady Gaga themed social networking website, LittleMonsters.com, users are suggested to describe their profession and a few words about themselves on their profile, and many self-describe as feminists, specifically using Gaga's lyrics, "blonde high-heeled feminist" as a descriptor. When asked if she was a feminist, and if Gaga had any influence on her feminism, aforementioned fan Melissa answered:

I am a feminist. Gaga has been one of my many influences... She has completely dismantled the taboo of "sex" and sexuality; she has helped expand feminism to include freedom of gender expression and by making the term "feminism" more inclusive.¹⁰⁵

By bringing up the removal the "taboo" of sex, Melissa is referring to ideas of sex positive feminism expressed by Gaga in "Dance in the Dark" as well as other facets of her career. Gaga's brand of acceptance and feminism have helped Melissa to also align herself with a more inclusive feminism, including not only biological females, but also transgendered people, and men. Previously mentioned fan Amethyst was unsure of her own stance as a feminist, but explicitly expressed how she, like Melissa, has come to recognize the importance of inclusive equality movements. She also stated that she finds Gaga and her music empowering for women, and that Gaga has inspired her to be strong and proud, and "not let boys walk all over me."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Melissa Marra, online interview with author, May 14, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Amethyst, online interview with author, May 6, 2012.

Little Monsters from around the globe use Gaga, her music, and her performances as a basis for cultivating their own ideas and expressions of feminism. She presents feminist concepts of female empowerment through collectivity, self-love, sex positivity, and subversive gender expressions. She has taught her fans to be proponents of inclusion and equality, and that women need to “fight for their rights.”¹⁰⁷ Through her work, Gaga has critiqued misogynistic media practices and worked to dismantle patriarchal oppression. She has taught millions of women and men around the world that it is more than acceptable to be a Free Bitch.

¹⁰⁷ Lady Gaga, *Scheiße*.

CHAPTER III: ESTABLISHING AND PERFORMING THE MONSTER IDENTITY

In November of 2009, Lady Gaga released a music video for her single “Bad Romance,” off of her sophomore album, *The Fame Monster*. The video for “Bad Romance” featured what was to become a piece of Gaga’s signature choreography, the “monster” dance. Performing the choreography to “Bad Romance” requires crooked elbows, bent wrists, and swiveling the arms back and forth, somewhat reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” choreography, with a hint of the 1960s twist. During the late 2009 tour, *The Monster Ball*, corresponding with the release of *The Fame Monster*, Gaga performed “Bad Romance,” and fans in the audience performed the trademark dance, to which Gaga reacted by labeling these fans “little monsters.” This instance propelled the “monster” designation to become representative of super fans of Lady Gaga. Although in its birth the Little Monster identity was solely based on a physical movement, it has, through three years and millions of fans, become a individual and collective identity and, to some, a family. In this chapter, I will address how Lady Gaga’s career provides Little Monsters with a foundation for forming identities, communities, and a subculture, and how these categories function independently, in relationships with one another, and in relation to Gaga herself.

In the book *Idolized*, Katherine Meizel states that “Culture in the United States is created in the continuous negotiation and renegotiation of...identities- of personal, community and national identities, informed by ideas about race and ethnicity, religion, place, gender...”¹⁰⁸ Although the Little Monster community does not function on a specifically national or American level, as a transnational community it works in similar ways. The Little Monster identity is

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 3.

negotiated through three main avenues: first, Little Monsters are individuals who identify personally as super fans of Lady Gaga, secondly Monsters form communities around their shared fandom, and finally, Gaga reinforces this fandom through her own work. Josh Kun, as quoted by Meizel, argues that “cultural citizenship is configured through the performance of popular music and its reception, via acts of listening, by the people.”¹⁰⁹ The cultural citizenship of the Little Monster may only entail a personal performance of Lady Gaga’s music through listening. The Little Monster identity is performed through a unified community. This community is constituted by millions of self-identified Little Monsters, and perpetuates the rules and moral codes Monsters must abide by. Although these rules and moral codes are fluid and flexible, there are most definitely standards Little Monsters must bear in order to be fully representative of the community at large. The Monster community as a whole also operates within smaller communities, based on sexual orientation, gender, race, nationality, and language. The third way the Little Monster identity operates is through an ongoing World Wide Web based relationship with Lady Gaga, whom Little Monsters refer to as Mother Monster. Mother Monster is the pinnacle of the rules and moral codes enacted by the Monster nation, and communicates with them on a regular basis, through social networking websites and public appearances. In this chapter I will explore the three major ways in which the Little Monster identity operates, including how and where each facet is performed, and why. I will subsequently address how these three platforms of identity enactment intersect with and inform one another.

Mother Monster

At the head of the Monster community is Lady Gaga, commonly referred to by Little Monsters as Mother Monster. Gaga as Mother Monster leads the community in a variety of

¹⁰⁹ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia*, quoted in Katherine Meizel, *Idolized*, 4.

ways. She performs as a political leader, rallying her constituents around a single goal. Similarly, she acts as a religious leader, abiding by a specific set of rules and moral codes which she expects her followers to also adhere to. Third, she acts as a part of the constituency, as a Monster, identifying with other Monsters. She performs these three roles through communicating with the Little Monster nation via her musical work, internet platforms, public appearances, interviews, and live performances.

“Born This Way” and the Church of the Little Monster

Through her musical body of work, Gaga creates and presents the rules and morals her fan base chooses to embody. The first commandment of the Monster religion is to love thyself. This message is explicitly expressed on Gaga’s third album, *Born This Way*, and even more so on the eponymous single. With “Born This Way,” Gaga is sermonizing a specific set of beliefs through her own quasi-religious rhetoric, presenting moral codes and ideologies through text and the utilization of symbols.

The music video for “Born This Way” opens with the Manifesto of Mother Monster, a text also utilized in her *Born This Way Ball* live tour. The manifesto is as follows:

On G.O.A.T, a Government Owned Alien Territory in space, a birth of magnificent and magical proportions took place. But the birth was not finite; it was infinite. As the wombs numbered, and the mitosis of the future began, it was perceived that this infamous moment in life is not temporal; it is eternal. And thus began the beginning of the new race: a race within the race of humanity, a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment, but boundless freedom. But on that same day, as the eternal mother hovered in the multiverse, another more terrifying birth took place: the birth of evil. And as she herself split into two, rotating in agony between two ultimate forces, the pendulum of choice began its dance. It seems easy, you imagine, to gravitate instantly and unwaveringly towards good. But she wondered, “how can I protect something so perfect without evil?”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Lady Gaga, “Born This Way,” February 28, 2011. <http://www.ladygaga.com/media/default.aspx?meid=6607>.

While the manifesto is spoken, Gaga, dressed as extra-terrestrial royalty, is depicted giving birth to a replica of herself. Simultaneously, Mother Monster's evil twin is giving birth to a skeleton man and a semi-automatic weapon. Here, Gaga illustrates herself as the Creator of a new race of people, as the "eternal Mother," and iterates the specific morality of this new race. They are nonjudgmental and do not demonstrate prejudice. The manifesto also suggests a good versus evil dichotomy. The prejudice-free race of Monsters cannot exist without the presence of evil doers. Through the manifesto, Gaga paints a somewhat biblical picture. Just as Adam and Eve had to choose between God's word and the tempting apple, Little Monsters must choose to join the race without judgment. Without sin, we could not know good and without prejudice we could not understand "boundless freedom." Through "Born This Way," Gaga puts forth a set of ideologies for Monsters to follow.

In his article "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism, and Meaning in Popular Music," Ken McLeod discusses the use of alien and/or futuristic imagery as a way to visually represent a sense of alienation or difference, and work to circumvent normative culture. He states that "futuristic images of aliens and outer space unite us with a common 'other' that transcends divisions of race, gender, sexual preference, religion or nationality."¹¹¹ McLeod specifically addresses David Bowie's use of the alter ego Ziggy Stardust as a way to transcend boundaries set by dominant ideologies regarding masculinity and heterosexuality in rock music.¹¹² The influence of Bowie on Gaga, discussed in a previous chapter, may have provided her with the initial concept for G.O.A.T and the alien birth. This alien concept along with the Manifesto of Mother Monster, articulates an idea akin to Bowie's transcendence of gender and sexuality boundaries. Gaga explicitly seeks to alienate herself and other Monsters from prejudice and

¹¹¹ Ken McLeod, "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism, and Meaning in Popular Music," *Popular Music* 22 (October 2003): 353.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 341.

judgment, and through the text of the song seeks to alienate herself and Monsters from the specific prejudices of gender, sexuality, race, and religion.

The lyrics of “Born This Way” act as a religious text for both Gaga herself and Little Monsters. Gaga addresses God, and what is assumed to be a Christian God due to her own Catholic heritage, throughout the track. The piece begins: “It doesn’t matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M / Just put your paws up / ‘Cause you were born this way.”¹¹³ She addresses God, as HIM, as well as the Little Monster ritual of putting your “paws” or clawed hands, in the air. She reiterates the title of song, “you were born this way,” projecting ideas of self-love and acceptance. The chorus of the song, as well as the bridge, outline the importance of self-love. The chorus is as follows:

I’m beautiful in my way / ‘Cause God makes no mistakes / I’m on the right track, baby /
I was born this way / Don’t hide yourself in regret / Just love yourself and you’re set /
I’m on the right track, baby / I was born this way.

With the chorus, Gaga makes a general statement about loving yourself and living life without regret. In the bridge, Gaga specifies who she is addressing. She chants:

Don’t be a drag, just be a queen / Whether you’re broke or evergreen / You’re black,
white, beige, chola descent / You’re Lebanese, you’re orient / Whether life’s disabilities /
Left you outcast, bullied or teased / Rejoice and love yourself today / ‘Cause baby, you
were born this way.

Although the text presented here may not be entirely politically correct, with specific reference to the phrases “orient” and “chola,” terms there were understood as racist by some and something that will be discussed later in this chapter. Gaga is addressing every identity factor she can fit in the sixteen bar phrase, including sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, and bullying. Gaga acts as a preacher during “Born This Way,” presenting her set of beliefs imbued with religious rhetoric. She addresses “capital H-I-M” numerous times during the song, and

¹¹³ Lady Gaga, “Born This Way,” *Born This Way*, Interscope Records, 2011.

emphasizes ideas of fate and destiny. There is no point in regretting who you are or who you have become because it is metaphysically destined to be. The idea of self-love recalls the original statement in the Manifesto of Mother Monster, the idea of a race without prejudice. Gaga, by calling out to a variety of genders, ethnicities, and sexualities, is not only telling her listeners to love themselves, but to refrain from the judgment of others.

Signs and symbols are often utilized to communicate the Born This Way ideals and unify the Monster community. The beginning and the end of the “Born This Way” video show a glowing neon triangle in which a unicorn is encased. The unicorn, being a symbol of unique beauty, is representative of destiny, of being “born this way.” Combining earthly with otherworldly, the unicorn becomes the symbol of both otherness and beauty, accepting its destiny as othered, yet magnificent. Little Monsters worldwide recognize the unicorn as a symbol of both Mother Monster and destiny. The unicorn acts as an icon, in the same way the Crucifix might arouse thoughts of Christianity. Although the unicorn isn’t as overtly religious or as heavily symbolic as a Crucifix, it acts similarly, as a sign indicating specific concepts and beliefs, most importantly as a representation for the gay community. The unicorn, utilized by Gaga as a symbol of uniqueness, is featured inside a triangle, representational of the gay community, making the purpose of the icons obvious.

Similarly, Gaga utilizes the “paws up” gesture, a clawed hand in the air, as a unifying symbol. All Little Monsters are aware of what putting your paws up means. It is a multilayered gesture, on the surface representing an affinity for Gaga and her music, secondly as representing an alignment with Gaga’s ideologies, and finally as a gesture used to communicate those ideologies and identify other Monsters.

With the combination of the symbol and seemingly religious text, Gaga outlines a specific set of moral codes for Little Monsters to follow and uses symbols to clearly convey those codes. She clearly places herself in the position of Mother Monster, creator of the Little Monster universe. Her morality here is stated clearly: love and accept yourself without conforming to the sociocultural norms, and in turn love and accept others. Although Gaga outlines her moral beliefs on other tracks, “Born This Way” is the most explicit example of this, and acts as an icon in itself.

In this same way, it could also be said that Gaga is purposefully creating a subculture. In the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige states that subcultures are constructed of “raw material” which is both “real and ideological.”¹¹⁴ They are based in reality, stemming from circumstances regarding actual political, religious, class based, etc. experiences. These experiences and contexts are then utilized as a basis for some sort of unifying ideology. The Monster subculture stems from circumstance of twenty-first century youth, identity struggles first and foremost, and responds with the ideological idea of being “born this way.” The use of identity struggle as foundational context opens up the ideological response to a number of concepts: LGBTQ rights, self-acceptance, feminism, and tolerance. Hebdige goes on to state that this raw material is “mediated to the individual members of a subculture through a variety of channels.”¹¹⁵ Within the Monster subculture, material is mediated through Gaga herself, her body of work, and the internet. Through this creation of a subculture, Gaga nurtures a fan base that she not only has emotional ties to, but also relies on financially, an idea that will be explored further on in this chapter.

¹¹⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. 81.

¹¹⁵ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 81.

Gaga as a Political Leader

Lady Gaga has, many times in the past, been active in American politics. Although a large portion of her fan base is located outside of the United States, the broadcasting of her activities on the internet allow her entire fan base access to her political ideals. The most prominent of Gaga's political endeavors is her status as a LGBTQ rights activist. In October of 2009, Gaga made her position on LGBTQ rights clearly known when she spoke at the National Equality March in Washington, DC. In this speech she insisted that "equality is not equal if it is only sometimes," and pledged to work to change "misogynistic and homophobic behavior in music, lyrics, or actions in the music industry."¹¹⁶

One year later, she posted a YouTube video encouraging young people everywhere to contact their senators to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell. Don't Ask Don't Tell is a 1993 law that barred gay servicemen and women from disclosing their sexuality. Fighting for the repeal of DADT has been one of Gaga's most fervent causes. In this video, Gaga asserted facts about the effects of DADT, as well as its unconstitutionality. She personally called her own senator (although they did not answer), and told viewers how they could contact their own senators to ask for the repeal of DADT.¹¹⁷ Three days after uploading this video to YouTube, Gaga spoke at a rally specifically organized to promote the repeal of DADT, and spoke about the blatant homophobia presented in the bill. As an openly bisexual woman, Gaga is given a platform to express her views on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights that creates a bridge between the gay community, popular music, and a worldwide audience. Her popularity is on par with that of President Barack Obama (and at a dinner the evening before the National Equality

¹¹⁶ "Lady Gaga Speaks at National Equality March," *CSPAN*. October 2009.

¹¹⁷ "A Message From Lady Gaga to the Senate Sept 16 2010," *YouTube*, September 17, 2010.

March he claimed he was only there to “open for Lady Gaga”¹¹⁸) and her messages are more easily accessible and garner a larger audience. As a political leader she has fought for the rights of LGBTQ identified persons, and has transmitted that message via political platforms as well as musical platforms to millions of listeners throughout the world.

Gaga has also been outspoken on the rights of immigrants in the United States. At a live performance in Phoenix, she spoke candidly about SB1070, an Arizona state bill that opponents felt legalized racial profiling in order to expose and deport illegal aliens. She spoke similarly at a concert in Mexico, and followed it with a performance of the song “Americano,” off of the *Born This Way* album. “Americano” is a love song from the point of view of an illegal Mexican immigrant in the United States. The love affair cannot be legally recognized because of one of the partner’s illegal status. She uses what she has described as a mariachi piece and layers it with a house beat. Although she doesn’t specifically discuss laws and never uses the word “immigrant” in the piece, it’s clear that Gaga is criticizing American policies on illegal immigration.

Gaga’s political stances are greatly reflected in her musical work, as well as publicly displayed in other ways, and are often taken up as causes by her fans. She makes her beliefs, moral values, and political stances obvious, and through these statements Little Monsters find commonalities with both Lady Gaga and one another. One young woman stated that Gaga’s stance on LGBTQ rights completely changed her opinion, stating “I actually used to be [one of] those people who said marriage was for man and woman only, but she changed my viewpoint... now I believe people should be able to marry each other based on love not gender.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ “Lady Gaga at HRC Dinner: Barack Obama ‘Opens’ for Lady Gaga at D.C. Banquet,” *Huffington Post Online*, March 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/11/lady-gaga-at-hrc-dinner-p_n_316572.html, accessed July 12, 2012.

¹¹⁹ Chellyelle, online interview with author, May 6, 2010.

Although not entirely political, Gaga's advocacy for anti-bullying causes is also a large part of her body of work. Tied in with the messages of self-acceptance and otherness in "Born This Way," Gaga is often advocating for those who have been bullied and made outcasts in any respect. In February of 2012 Gaga and her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, founded the Born This Way Foundation, a nonprofit organization that, according to their website, is centered around

foster[ing] a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated. The Foundation is dedicated to creating a safe community that helps connect young people with the skills and opportunities they need to build a braver, kinder world.¹²⁰

The Born This Way Foundation encourages acceptance and seeks to expose bullying as a larger societal problem. In September of 2011 a young fan of Lady Gaga committed suicide because of his experiences being bullied. Jamie Rodemeyer was a self-identified Little Monster, and looked to Lady Gaga as an icon of love and acceptance. Rodemeyer, fifteen years old and openly gay, was bullied constantly. His last communication via the internet was to Lady Gaga, on the social networking site Twitter, saying "bye mother monster, thank you for all you have done, paws up forever." This tragedy greatly impacted Gaga, and was one of the major factors in starting the Born This Way Foundation. This incident also inspired a meeting with President Barack Obama to advocate for anti-bullying legislation.¹²¹ Rodemeyer's death also led to the creation of the Paws Up Forever Project,¹²² a fan led initiative to combat bullying and provide support for those Monsters who may be depressed or contemplating suicide. The Paws Up Forever Project works similarly to Gaga's advocacy for anti-bullying legislation, only at a grassroots level and without the massive amount of funds she has at her disposal. The Little Monsters that run Paws Up

¹²⁰ "Our Mission," *Born This Way Foundation*, <http://bornthiswayfoundation.org/pages/our-mission/>.

¹²¹ This meeting originated through a fundraising dinner. Without a monetary gift, Gaga would never have been able to meet President Obama.

¹²² Paws Up Forever Project, pawsupforeverproject.com, pawsupforeverproject.tumblr.com accessed August 1, 2012.

Forever make low budget videos and broadcast them on whatever network possible in order to spread their ideas.

Problematizing Gaga's Standpoint

While *Born This Way* and Gaga's political stances are beneficial to a large part of her audience, it often works as a way for her to, yet again, inadvertently exercise her privilege. As previously stated, the bridge section of "Born This Way" aims to reach a large number of people through its proposed inclusivity. Contrary to this, however, Gaga's use of the language "orient," "chola," and "transgendered" were seen as offensive to some. The Phoenix-based Latino group Chicanos Unidos Arizona asserted that Gaga's use of the term "chola" was derogatory to female Latinas.¹²³ Utilized in the context of the song, it's clear that Gaga is not consciously being racist or even demeaning. Perhaps she chose the word because of its convenience in the lyrics, or as some form of empowerment for Latinas. However, as a white American woman, her use of the term reflects an insensitivity to its history and meaning. Similarly, her use of the phrases "orient" and "orient made" suggests an ignorance to the exoticization and commodification of "the orient." Oriental, referring originally to all people and things east of Europe, is often utilized as a racially insensitive way to place every person or thing of any type of Asian descent into one category, and its use in "Born This Way" further shows Gaga's ignorance to the negative connotations of the word.

In the same stanza of the track, she sings the lyric "transgendered life." One trans* blogger argued that the use of the word "transgender" in past tense, as well as the inclusion of the word "life," made it seem as though being trans* was a lifestyle choice. The term

¹²³ "Phoenix Latino Groups Criticize Lady Gaga for 'Racist' Lyrics," *Examiner.com*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.examiner.com/article/phoenix-latino-groups-criticize-lady-gaga-for-racist-lyrics>, accessed July 30, 2012.

transgendered comes across as an adjective rather than a lived experience. The same blogger said that:

my being trans, it is not a past tense thing. It will never be a past tense thing. It is my life, my experiences, my fucked up body, the way I'm forced to live. To say it is a thing of the past is to deny the struggle my entire life has been, and [continues] to exist.¹²⁴

Whether purposeful or not, Gaga's inclusion of these offensive terms in a single that grossed innumerable amounts of money helps to not only commodify these negative phrases, but also the stereotypical identities that go along with them. Unfortunately, Gaga has made money because of "Born This Way," either because of or in spite of her white, cisgender privilege. Similarly, Gaga's crafting of a gay anthem commercializes the gay community and leads to her profiting from the specific targeting of those within the community and allies of the community. Although Gaga herself identifies as bisexual, the commodification of the LGBTQ identity in "Born This Way," as well as in other facets of her career, cannot be denied.

The presumed inclusion of all of these stereotypes feed directly into what Victor Corona deems "Gaga's pursuit of an enduring cultural presence."¹²⁵ Although Corona refers primarily to the hypermodern spectacle put on by Gaga, her attempts to comment on and advocate for sociocultural issues not only paints her as a humanitarian, but also helps push her career further into superstardom. As stated previously in this chapter, Gaga nurtures her Little Monsters, perhaps not with the intent of monetary gain, but with that always ultimately the result.

From Personal Identity to Online Collective

¹²⁴ "Lady Gaga is not Pro LGBT," August 30, 2011, <http://offensivethingsladygagadoes.tumblr.com/post/9593270835/lady-gaga-is-not-pro-lgbt>, accessed August 1, 2012.

¹²⁵ Corona, "Memory, Monsters, and Lady Gaga," 2.

Little Monsters around the globe use the moral and political beliefs asserted by Lady Gaga as a model for their own personal identities. The Little Monster community functions outside of Lady Gaga's communication in two specific ways, as a personal identity and as a communal identity. Both of these identities rely heavily on the material presented in the previous sections, and are intrinsically linked to both Mother Monster and one another. In this section I will address first, how the Little Monster community constitutes what Thomas Turino would describe as a cultural cohort, and how the specifics of this cohort let it function as a unified community. Secondly I will address how the community functions logistically, and finally I will discuss the effects the personal and shared Monster identity has had on the lives of fans across the globe.

Cultural Cohorts and Imagined Communities

Being a Little Monster comes first and foremost within the self. The primary criteria of Monster-dom is that one must enjoy the music of Lady Gaga and participate in it on an individual level. Thomas Turino suggested in his chapter "Habits of Self, Identity, and Culture" that the self encompasses all of the habits and traits "specific to an individual that develop through the ongoing interchanges of the individual with her physical and social surroundings."¹²⁶ Turino asserts that identity is a partial selection of these habits and traits used to publicly and privately represent the self. The personal designation of Little Monster is composed of a specific set of traits and habits, most importantly a musical affinity for Lady Gaga's work. One Monster disclosed that she had been a fan of Gaga from her first single, and was then drawn into Gaga's extramusical messages. However, most fans, when asked about their affinity for Gaga, addressed first and foremost their attachment to the ideas presented in her work, rather than the music itself.

¹²⁶ Thomas Turino, "Habits of the Self, Identity, and Culture," in *Music as Social Life: Politics of Participation*. 95.

From this musical affinity stems other habits, such as concordance with Gaga's own traits, habits, and socio-cultural values. These shared socio-cultural values are iterated by Mother Monster through her communication with Little Monsters, and include individuality, non-conformity, compassion, and self-acceptance. These publicly presented values help Little Monsters to choose which habits and traits to personally express themselves in order to project the Little Monster identity to themselves, by themselves to others, and by others on them.

When I questioned fans who identify as Little Monsters how the name came to be utilized as the designation for her most ardent fans, I received many responses, several of which addressed being a Little Monster with an emphasis on the personal. Tomas, a Lithuanian Little Monster, claimed that he was "already a Little Monster, before I knew it."¹²⁷ He goes on to assert that the way others view him, rather than the way he views himself, legitimizes the habits that allow him to self-identify as a Little Monster. He was told that he was "a non-conformist that makes it a point to rebel against the constraints of society," and that he had "an open mind," all cultural values projected by Lady Gaga through her music and personal habits, and necessary in order to identify or be identified as a Little Monster. Amethyst, an English Little Monster, described identifying as a Little Monster as "self-discovery."¹²⁸ She emphasizes pride and strength as important habits in claiming this identity.

The most prominent enactment of the Little Monster identity is within the Little Monster community. A person who identifies and is identified as a Little Monster understands that one of the primary habits practiced in this claimed identity is communication and connection with others who identify or are self-identified as Little Monsters. The community is created and continually enacted through connecting personally identified Little Monsters with one another

¹²⁷ Tomas, online interview with author, May 20, 2012.

¹²⁸ Amethyst, online interview with author, May 6, 2012.

and with Mother Monster. The Little Monster community is where the social and individual intersect, creating a large body of self-identified Little Monsters who act as a large, unified body.

In *Idolized*, Katherine Meizel posits that the nature of reality television is intertextual and that this intertextuality consists of multiple layers, specifically because of the way websites and message boards extend “viewers engagement with reality programs,” also arguing that the “voyage into cyberspace adds a new element of hypertextuality.”¹²⁹ The concept of multi-layered intertextuality to the point of hypertextuality may also apply to online communities centered around popular musicians. The engagement with the primary text of Gaga’s musical product to fans is extended, most importantly, via the internet. Similarly to communication on message boards between fans of a reality television show, Little Monsters connect online to discuss Gaga’s most recent endeavor as a secondary text. Fans may also connect with Gaga herself, or at least feel as though they are connecting with Gaga, creating what Meizel refers to as an “interactive audience,” rather than a simply active one.

Turino might refer to the Little Monster community as what he deems cultural cohorts. Cultural cohorts, or identity cohorts, are “social groupings that form along the lines of specific constellations of a shared habit based in similar parts of the self.”¹³⁰ According to Turino, cohorts can be interest-based, and involvement in these cohorts are consciously chosen. Self-identification as a Little Monster and participation within the cohort of the Little Monster community is entirely chosen and free. Little Monsters recognize the shared habits and identities of their cultural cohort, and personal definitions of Little Monster are imbued with connectivity and unification through these shared habits.

¹²⁹ Meizel, *Idolized*, 40.

¹³⁰ Turino, “Habits of the Self, Identity, and Culture,” 111.

Embodying Monster Ideals Through Internet Communication

The cultural cohort that is the Little Monster collective operates through the messages and moral beliefs presented by Gaga as the leader of the community as mentioned earlier. Although some may view cyber imagined communities as a false reality without purpose, many people view the Monster community as the cultural cohort in which they are most participatory and most connected to others. Matteo, a twenty year old Little Monster from Italy, is one of the most “fanned”¹³¹ Little Monsters on the Lady Gaga specific social network LittleMonsters.com. Matteo discussed how his relationship to other Little Monsters is an important relationship that is only virtual. Because of his geographic location he is unable to participate in the Little Monster community in any other way. Via social networking websites Little Monsters like Matteo are able participate in a cultural cohort they feel connected to, and perhaps someday connect in a physical reality.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Lady Gaga often acts as an activist for the rights of the queer community. This activism is also enacted by Little Monsters, often using Gaga’s own actions and statements as a model for their own beliefs. Matteo, for example, said that Gaga has positively changed the way he views the gay community, and Jesse, a 19 year old American Monster was open in that Gaga’s work had taught him that it was “ok to be gay” and that he was “born this way.”¹³² He also divulged although he may not have been entirely accepting in the past, she opened his eyes, and he is now more compassionate towards those in oppressive situations. Once a bully, he now posts images advocating LGBTQ acceptance and equality. One English Little Monster even brought up Gaga’s advocacy with DADT when discussing her

¹³¹ To be “fanned” on LittleMonsters.com means that your fan art or discussion posts have garnered attention, and other users are now “fans” of yours, and now follow your posts. Fanning is not mutual, you do not have to fan a user back if they fan you first. Matteo, however, advertises on his profile that he will “fanback,” which in turn pushes users to fan him first.

¹³² Jesse Cejas, online interview with author, May 12 2012.

activism. Many of the most liked¹³³ posts on LittleMonsters.com express LGBTQ acceptance and promote non-heteronormative love and equality.

Another sentiment brought up by Jesse was bullying, also one of Mother Monster's major causes. Jesse was clear both in my interview with him and in other posts made on LittleMonsters.com that he had lived his life before Gaga as a bully. In a text post, Jesse thanked Lady Gaga for her anti-bullying advocacy. He stated "I was once a bully, but through your activism, I saw how horrible bullying really was. I would like to apologize for the torturing I used to cause on people's lives."¹³⁴ On this post, he connected with another Little Monster I interviewed, Tomas. Tomas expressed that he had been on both sides of bullying. When I asked Tomas about his experience, he divulged that he had been involved in bullying experiences before he became a fan of Lady Gaga. Because of Tomas' age, Gaga was not around during his adolescence, however he stated that post-Gaga he "became aware that there are people who do something about it and that there are more victims than I thought."¹³⁵

Many Little Monsters claim feelings of otherness and outsider statuses within some of their other cultural formations, i.e. family, school, religious, and geographic communities. They connect with each other through the internet in order to feel like they are not outsiders, and form a community of misfits. Although Tomas and Jesse have been the bully in the past, a lot of Little Monsters identify as the bullied. Gaga's ideas of self-acceptance are greatly intertwined with the bullied coming to terms with their otherness. Using "Born This Way" as a text for their own freedom from bullies and self-destruction is a shared experience that links the Monster cohort. Many expressed how being a Little Monster and interacting with others allowed them to embrace

¹³³ "Liking" posts on LittleMonsters.com is comparable to "liking" something on other social networking websites. Underneath all posts there are three buttons: one to like, one to dislike, and one to comment.

¹³⁴ Jesse, "I Am a Better Person, Thanks to You <3," littlemonsters.com/text/26604

¹³⁵ Tomas, Online Interview. May 23, 2012.

their uniqueness and express feelings of non-conformity in a positive light. Melissa, a 23 year old Little Monster from Colorado, described being a part of the Little Monster community as a “truly unique experience,” and that it is a “space where you will be accepted and loved unconditionally for exactly who you are.”¹³⁶ Similarly, a Little Monster from Texas expressed that being a Little Monster helped her recover from severe depression, self-esteem, and body issues. They stated that being part of the community made them feel like they were “normal for once.” These sort of coming-to-terms statements are rampant on LittleMonsters.com and clearly demonstrate the feeling of otherness shared by a large majority of the Little Monster community.

The shared traits and habits among Little Monsters that allow them to function as a cultural cohort are established and shared via social networking websites. These commonalities and shared habits include sentiments of otherness, a sense of non-conformity, self-love, a belief in equality, and looking to Lady Gaga as a role model for all of these things. Her own presentations of her moral and political stances become a model for which Little Monsters use to conceptualize their own beliefs. Through these shared beliefs Lady Gaga and the millions of Little Monsters around the globe are able to function as a cultural cohort and community, with goals and purposes, both small and large. The Little Monster community is made up individuals who previously felt unwanted, outcast, and othered, but through Gaga based commonalities, they form a unified community that strengthens individuals, provides a sense of belonging, and functions as a cultural cohort in which individuals feel connected to and participate in. Melissa articulately summed up what the Monster community means to her, and how it functions in the aforementioned ways:

A “Little Monster” is more than just a fan. It is a label that we Gaga lovers give ourselves to align ourselves with the iconic symbol that is Gaga, which encompasses unconditional love, freedom, empowerment, and acceptance. All you have to do is raise

¹³⁶ Melissa, online interview with author, May 15, 2012.

your “paw” and every Little Monster knows what the means and they will respond with raising their “paw.” This gesture creates an unspoken bond that binds us together. It’s almost like “Little Monsters” is a movement of its own, led by our Mother Monster. We are taking the streets, the clubs, and the stage to spread love and expose intolerance and inequality.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Melissa, online interview with author, May 30, 2012.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis addressed the ways in which Lady Gaga, as a person, performer, and product, plays a role in the crafting of identities and communities. I specifically looked at how Gaga's body of work functions as a critique to misogynist, sexist, homophobic, and intolerant ideologies. Fans ally themselves with these critiques, and along with being a fan of Gaga's music, use them as an identifying trait, as a way to represent themselves to the outside world. I discuss these concepts within the context of three major categories.

I addressed first how Lady Gaga and two of her contemporaries, Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, portray female sexuality in music videos. Swift, through her song and corresponding video "Fifteen," portrays an air of virginal innocence, and appears to condemn those that disagree with her own personal lifestyle choice. Through musical material, visuals, and text Swift presents the idea that in order to succeed in life, one must remain chaste, and that straying from this path will have great consequence. The music, visuals, and text presented by Perry in the piece "California Gurls" presents an idea contrary to Swifts: that sexuality should be embraced and utilized for the pleasure of males. Perry parades around in child-like garb, being literally controlled by a man. She appears innocent and submissive while clearly being sexually available for masculine pleasure. Gaga, also contrary to Swift, creates a representation of overt female sexuality, which she wields as a weapon for her own purposes in the song and video for "Bad Romance," utilizing it to free herself from a misogynist reality. Similarly to Swift but contrary to Perry, Gaga presents her sexuality as her own to control, except she controls it in an extremely different manner than Swift. Gaga utilizes her own sexuality through the visuals of "Bad Romance" to

gain control over dominating male figures, and through the text and musical material makes it known that she isn't afraid of her own sexuality and is assertive about what she wants.

Second, I examined the ways in which Gaga demonstrates feminist concepts through her body of work, specifically in the contexts of lyrical material and public appearances. Through her texts, Gaga presents ideas of sex positivity, female collectivity, and self love, advocating for females to stand up for their own rights. In her public appearances she works to subvert traditional standards held to female popular musicians, often appearing as either an exaggerated femme or in drag. These two major categories of Gaga's work help her to deconstruct hetero-patriarchal norms and undermine misogynist standards of gender and sexuality.

Finally, I discussed how fans of Lady Gaga, named Little Monsters by the superstar, utilize Gaga's texts to craft their own identities and communities. The crafting of these identities function on three major levels. The first is the presentation of material to fans by Gaga, including moral and political stances, and the mediation of that material in order to purposefully create a fan base with specific goals and interests. Secondly, individuals adopt these goals and purposes and incorporate them with their fanaticism to present an identity to the outside world, by way of selecting habits and traits that focus on Gaga and using them as a representation of self. Thirdly, those that self-identify as Little Monsters connect via the internet to solidify their own personal identities and create communities, cohorts, and an overall subculture.

This thesis explored by what means popular musicians present themselves to audiences and fans in order to communicate specific goals and ideologies. I explored how Lady Gaga, along with her fans, utilize mass media in order craft specific identities. I conclude that popular music is a medium through which major moral, political, and ideological goals may be communicated, adopted by fans, and perpetuated in numerous ways. Lady Gaga is extremely

adept at communicating specific concepts to fans and in turn building a fan base with specific interests and goals. Through these shared interests, fans create a subculture, which perpetuates the concepts through communication within the community, communication with others outside of the community, and monetary support for Lady Gaga.

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Informed Consent

My name is Abbie Brinson Woodruff. I am a Master's student in the field of Ethnomusicology at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. I am conducting research on the effects of Lady Gaga, fans of Lady Gaga, and social networking on LGBTQ identification and feminist expression. You are being asked to participate in this research because of your previously expressed opinions of Lady Gaga, LGBTQ identity, feminist thought, or a combination of the three. Participants must be 18 years or older.

The purpose of my research is to outline the ways in which Lady Gaga has directly effected the opinions and identities of fan, specifically through queer acceptance or feminist expressions. There are no direct benefits in participating in this research.

I will be collecting data for this research through interviews conducted online. Data will also be collected through observation of participants on websites such as Twitter, tumblr, or LittleMonsters.com. Acting as a participant in this research will take minimal time out of your normal routine. Participation will primarily be collected when you, the participant, are already online. Any interviews will be arranged for your convenience and will take no more than fifteen minutes of your time.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not impact any relationship participants may have with Bowling Green State University.

Data collected from this research will be stored digitally on a password protected personal computer, available only to myself, the researcher. Data will be kept indefinitely, but will be kept confidential. As a participant, your name and age will be the only personal information collected by myself, the researcher, and will be kept confidential. Therefore, data will not be collected anonymously and the study itself is not anonymous. However, as a participant you are free to choose how you will be represented in the final product of my research: anonymously, by your internet pseudonym, or by your actual name. Because research will be conducted online, please keep in mind that some employers may use tracking software so you may want to keep participation on a personal computer. Please do not leave research participation open if using a public computer or a computer others may have access to. It may also be beneficial to clear your browser cache and page history after completing any sort of research participation.

As a participant, there will be no risk involved in participating in this research, and the risks of participation are no greater than those experienced in daily life.

I am available to answer any questions about this research or your participation in this research. I am able to be reached via email at abbieb@bgsu.edu, or by telephone at +1(315)767-9282. My advisor for this research, Dr. Kara Attrep, can be reached at kattrep@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you for your time.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

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