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“Same DNA, but Born this Way”: Lady Gaga and the Possibilities of Postessentialist Feminisms

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Since bursting on the scene in 2008 with her first studio album, *The Fame*, Lady Gaga has enjoyed the devotion of an unusually dedicated cadre of fans, affectionately dubbed her “little monsters.” Lady Gaga also has attracted the attention of scholars, leading to numerous tongue-in-cheek media reports documenting the rise of Gaga Studies as a field of academic inquiry (Corona, 2010; Eby, 2010).¹ Required reading now includes J. Jack Halberstam’s recent book, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012). In the opening pages, Halberstam offers up Lady Gaga as “a symbol for a new kind of feminism” (xii). This new feminism, which Halberstam dubs gaga feminism, “. . . is simultaneously a monstrous outgrowth of the unstable category of ‘woman’ in feminist theory, a celebration of the joining of femininity to artifice, and a refusal of the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood” (xiii). As Halberstam explains, gaga feminism rejects the “fixity of roles for males and females” (5) and celebrates “the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality” (25). It is a feminism that “recognizes multiple genders, that contributes to the collapse of our current sex-gender systems” (25). In its wake, gaga feminism creates an opening for “new forms of relation, intimacy, technology, and embodiment” (25).

Halberstam insists that gaga feminism “derives from Lady Gaga and has everything to do with Lady Gaga,” but quickly adds that gaga feminism “is not limited to Lady Gaga” (xii). In fact, Lady Gaga turns out to be a fleeting figure in *Gaga Feminism*, invoked more as muse than object of sustained critical inquiry.² In what follows, I explore a question surprisingly sidelined in Halberstam’s analysis: how gaga is Lady Gaga? Taking seriously Halberstam’s suggestion that Lady Gaga be engaged as a symbol, or “marker,” of a new feminist formation, I ask what an analysis of some of Lady Gaga’s most well-known songs and music videos might reveal about the possibilities and limits of the kind of queer feminist position Halberstam evokes, a feminism that takes as its chief aim the

subversion of traditional gender roles and sexual identities through creative acts of “improvisation, customization, and innovation” (xiv). In this way, this analysis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that takes popular music seriously as a site for feminist inquiry (Brooks, 2007; James, 2008; Peoples 2008; Lee 2010; Cárdenas 2012; Durham et al., 2013). Through an analysis of the songs and performances of popular artists including Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Ke\$ha, recent critical work moves beyond a concern with the impact of individual female performers to ask what these artists’ songs, videos, and performances might reveal about “the status of contemporary feminisms” (Cárdenas, 2012, 176).

The question of Lady Gaga’s relation to feminism has generated significant controversy among popular and scholarly commentators.³ Those who challenge Lady Gaga’s claim to the feminist mantle wonder whether a pop diva known for her love of high fashion, her model thin figure, and her penchant for sexually charged performances really deserves credit as a liberatory figure. Philosopher Nancy Bauer (2010) worries that “a certain class of comfortably affluent young women” are drawn to Lady Gaga precisely because she represents the chimerical possibility that autonomy can flourish in a context of sexual subordination.⁴ In Bauer’s view, Lady Gaga stands for the kind of pseudofeminism that encourages women to experience “self-objectification” as a giddy expression of personal power. This troubles Bauer, who finds too many of today’s young women “tell[ing] themselves a Gaga-esque story” about sexual empowerment when they find themselves “on their knees in front of a worked-up guy they just met at a party”—as if willing submission were tantamount to sexual agency.

More cynically, in an online forum hosted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, art scholar Laurie Fendrich (2010) attributes Lady Gaga’s appeal to “the hope she brings to all girls who worry they aren’t beautiful enough—and more sorrowfully, and particularly, to all girls who are truly as homely as she is.”⁵ The suggestion that Lady Gaga’s appeal is rooted in an unsettling blend of Barbie-doll elements with components of failed femininity is intriguing. But Fendrich’s contention that Lady Gaga gives hope to “homely” feminists everywhere by reminding them that they can always “[play] the raunchy sex card” is not just uncharitable, but analytically shallow. Unquestionably, Lady Gaga can be raunchy, but that hardly counts as a mark of distinction in the contemporary pop culture playing field.⁶ Moreover, Fendrich seems to miss the punchline altogether in concluding that Lady Gaga’s underlying message is that anyone—even those who are not fashion model pretty—can still be a fashion model. More accurately,

Lady Gaga's arresting fashion interventions, including the notorious "meat dress," constitute an ingenious campaign to throw into question the very standards by which beauty itself is defined.

Controversy over Lady Gaga's position in the contemporary feminist field has been stoked by Lady Gaga herself. In a 2009 interview posted on YouTube under the heading "Lady Gaga on Double Standards & Feminism," the performer issues a sneering dismissal of feminism, declaring "I'm not a feminist. I hail men! I love men!"⁷ Susan McClary observes that popular female performers commonly renounce the term "feminist," regardless of their politics. "In interview after interview they recite what sounds to our ears like the very core of feminist thought, only to punctuate their statements with the phrase, 'But I'm not a feminist!'" (2000, 1284). McClary attributes this distancing to the media's dismal portrayal of the archetypal feminist, and more specifically to the "feel-good, folk-based repertory that circulated at 1970s music festivals"—a niche with which women in music do not wish to risk being associated (1284). Reflecting on Lady Gaga's insistence that "I hail men!," *Gaga Stigmata* commentator Meghan Vicks makes a compelling case that when her comments are heard in context, Lady Gaga's intent clearly is not to disavow feminism, but instead to challenge the reductive view of feminism as opposing men, rather than male privilege.

In subsequent interviews, Lady Gaga has been more willing to acknowledge her feminist sympathies (Powers, 2009; Strauss, 2010). In a 2010 *Rolling Stones* interview, she reflects, "... I put out music videos, and I do performances, and I am 79 percent of the time shocked by how people respond, because I don't really think it's particularly groundbreaking or shocking. I think it's just me and who I am, and I'm a feminist" (Strauss). Arguably, Lady Gaga has proven most "shocking" to fans and critics alike when she has been least "groundbreaking." On February 11, 2011, Lady Gaga released her much anticipated single "Born this Way."⁸ The song immediately proved controversial. Gay men were widely presumed to be the song's primary subjects of address, but the lyrics cast the broadest possible net. In the opening lines, Lady Gaga intones: "It doesn't matter if you love him or capital H-I-M/Just put your paws up/'Cause you were born this way, baby." The initial verses, sung in the first person, present an autobiographical narrative of the singer's journey to self-acceptance. In the first verse, her mother's advice is recounted: "There's nothin' wrong with lovin' who you are/She said, 'cause He made you perfect, babe." The song then builds to the exultant chorus: "Ooh, there ain't no other way, baby, I was born this way/I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way."

“Born this Way” cemented Lady Gaga’s reputation as a pop crusader for anyone and everyone positioned outside the social mainstream. Indeed, “Born This Way” packages the idea of tolerance in terms so generic, it has an equally crowd-pleasing effect blaring in a sweaty nightclub as it does anchoring the musical finale in the family friendly Chipmunks movie, *Chipwrecked*. The massive appeal of the song has proven awkward for some Lady Gaga devotees. Perhaps it is the song’s seemingly frictionless climb to the top of charts that raises the uncomfortable possibility that the condition of marginalization it addresses might be exaggerated in the first place. Or maybe it is anxiety that the song’s easily digestible message indicates that Lady Gaga had sold out, cashing in on the feel-good-we’re-all-post-homophobic vibe of the contemporary moment. But whether one’s reaction is to feel duped by Lady Gaga or awed by the neoliberal culture machine’s capacity to profit from subversion even as it neutralizes it—the song, and its reception, remains something of a sore point, especially for Lady Gaga’s most critically informed fans.

Beyond the matter of commercial success of “Born this Way,” commentators have struggled to reconcile themselves to the song’s apparent endorsement of a decidedly un-queer liberatory vision, pitching the case for acceptance on an old-fashioned essentialist logic. Micha Cárdenas describes “Born this Way” as “a biologically determinist anthem . . . which demands recognition because of an inherent and unchanging identity” (178). On similar grounds, Halberstam takes pains in *Gaga Feminism* to disavow the song not once, but twice (26, 137). Recounting her own distressed reaction to “Born this Way,” *Gaga Stigmata* contributor Samantha Cohen (2011) explains that prior to the release of the song, she had cherished Lady Gaga as an “anti-essentialist beacon” in “the bio-deterministic world of mainstream media.”⁹ As the pop patron saint of queer existence, Cohen saw the pre-“Born this Way” Lady Gaga as embodying the liberating possibility that each of us “can form ourselves into . . . our own self-birthing centers. That we can curl in on ourselves and gestate, any time we need to, and be reborn.” And then along comes “Born this Way,” a song that seems to trade the risk, dangers, and allure of unconstrained self-reinvention for a conventional defense of the right to be “who you are.” Confessing to a nagging sense that her own overwrought determination to redeem the song will amount to nothing more than “elaborate excuse-making” for a hero she had so enthusiastically credited with popularizing the idea of “performance as identity,” Cohen finally regards the song as a noble capitulation to political exigency. “Gaga knows that essentialism’s [sic] what gay-basher bullies are

able to hear, what those in power to change the gay rights situation know how to respond to.” Cohen arrives, then, at a familiar compromise, aligning with antiessentialism in principle, while endorsing (or at least, making peace with) the adoption of essentialist rhetoric as a political strategy.

But is “Born this Way” the essentialist cop-out the critics make it out to be? Maybe not. As much as the song might appear to retreat from the antiessentialist position Lady Gaga once seemed so firmly to have staked, one also finds evidence of a canny resistance to the essentialism the song’s lyrics affirm. To explain, recall that the initial scandal that erupted upon the release of the “Born this Way” single concerned not the song’s message, but its melody. Upon first listen, “Born this Way” came off to many as a blatant rip-off of Madonna’s iconic 1989 hit, “Express Yourself” (Makarechi, 2012). To be sure, the flak over “Born this Way” was hardly the first occasion on which Lady Gaga had been compared to Madonna. Indeed, Madonna has been a constant reference point throughout Lady Gaga’s career, not altogether surprisingly given the superficial physical resemblance and common Italian-American background, not to mention the obvious relish with which both performers play the cultural provocateur.¹⁰ Against this background, one might read the overt, even heavy-handed melodic citation of “Express Yourself” in “Born this Way” not as an unacknowledged imitation but rather as a cheeky response to the comparison itself—a rejoinder that constitutes neither a denial nor an affirmation, but instead proposes that not just her music, but Lady Gaga herself, exemplifies the generative possibilities of repetition with a difference.

Nonetheless, the irony here runs deep: Lady Gaga’s grand tribute to individuality is a blatant copy. And in case the listener still doesn’t get it, the 18th track on the *Born this Way* album underscores the point with a country remake of the more familiar, synth and dance-beat heavy version. “*Ooh, there ain’t no other way*”? Oh, but there is. By including two versions of the same song on the album, the very notion of an original song—or hit “single”—is thrown into question. In this way, “Born this Way” would seem to summon Judith Butler’s (1990) well-known reflections on gender parody:

[T]he notion of gender parody . . . does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; [G]ender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation.

This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. (1990, 138)

What if one were to conceive of the stripped down country-version of “Born this Way” as a parody of essentialism itself, operating, in the way Butler describes, to denaturalize the notion of an original through a parodic remake of the song—in this case, ironically done over in a genre (country) that is virtually synonymous with authenticity?

Far from endorsing essentialism, then, “Born This Way” troubles the very possibility of distinguishing original from copy, essence from performance, self from expression. This reading is given further ballast when considering the extended version of the “Born this Way” video, which features a spectacular visual preamble accompanied by a dramatic voice-over presenting the “Manifesto of Mother Monster.” In a series of disconcertingly graphic scenes, a self-creation myth unfolds in which Lady Gaga gives birth to seemingly infinite versions of herself. As an origin myth, the opening sequence is deliciously provocative. But the fantastical nature of the story obscures the fact that the narrative refuses to answer the question motivating the revelation in the first place, that is, the demand to know how the singularity known as Lady Gaga became who she is. As a celebrity who has turned the critical gaze on fame itself, Lady Gaga’s insistence that she was “born this way” might thus be read as an exasperated refusal to explain or account for herself. To insist that she is who she is because she was “born this way” is to decline the kind of pop psychological logic that fuels a public demand to know ever-more minute details about the childhood, family situation, and upbringing of celebrities. At the same time, the claim to have been “born this way” disavows agency in her self-production with the kind of ontological shrug that says not just “who knows?” but “who cares?” In this way, “Born this Way” might be said to conjure a postessentialist feminism that dispenses with critical hand-wringing over the taint of biodeterminism and instead gets on with the creative business of self-reinvention.¹¹ As all good poker players know (and Lady Gaga is of course known for her “Poker Face”), the winners aren’t the ones who hold the best cards, but rather, those who live by that timeworn gambler’s creed: “Play the hand you’re dealt.” Far

from an essentialist fold, then, to declare “I was born this way” is to suggest we stop getting hung up on the “what’s dealt” part—and get on with the *play*.

Read in this light, Lady Gaga stakes a position that has resonance with Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of the body as a situation. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1989) famously concludes: “. . . the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society” (37).¹² However, even while claiming a Beauvoirian lineage for gaga feminism, Halberstam adjudges “Born this Way” to be decidedly un-gaga:

And by the way, contrary to Lady Gaga’s own manifesto, you will not be born a gaga feminist, “Born this Way,” you will, to quote an earlier gaga feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, become one. Gaga feminism will be a way of seeing new realities that shadow our everyday lives—gaga feminists will see multiple genders, finding male/female dichotomies to be outdated and illogical (26).

On my reading, however, “Born this Way” is entirely consistent with this version of the gaga feminist vision. Adopting Halberstam’s engine metaphor, the point is that body parts—whether automotive or biological—may just as well enable “improvisation, customization, and innovation” as foreclose these possibilities (xiv). Indeed, “Born this Way” might even be understood to take the argument one step further by throwing into question the association between biology and determinism in the first place, as some feminist science scholars have sought to do in recent years. For example, against the reigning ideology of “anatomical essentialism,” philosopher Catherine Malabou (2009) emphasizes the “originary suppleness” of the brain and suggests that biology be understood as a “space of play” (138). Similarly, feminist scholar Elizabeth Wilson takes issue with the uncritical “fantasy,” pervasive in feminist and queer theory, that “biological matter is sovereign, intransigent, bullying” (2010, 197). Instead, Wilson offers an account of bodily matters that “vouches for the capacity of biological substance to forge complex alliances and diverse forms” (197). From this vantage point, biology is recognized as a site of possibility, a source of difference. Or as Lady Gaga puts it: “Same DNA/But Born This Way.”

While commentators have carefully parsed the meaning of “Born this Way” to decipher its implications for sexual identity politics, much less attention has been paid to the song’s deployment of terms denoting racialized identities. Given how prominent references to race are in the lyrics, however, this critical neglect warrants closer consideration. While “Born this Way” opens with an obvious allusion to same-sex sexuality (“It doesn’t matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M), later verses issue an explicit call for solidarity among socially marginalized subjects identified by reference to gender, sexuality, race, class, physical ability, and social standing:

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

In her commentary on “Born this Way” discussed in the preceding, Cohen indicates particular discomfort with term “orient-made.” She is doubtless not alone (Garcia, 2011). It is telling, however, that rather than pursue the matter, Cohen demurs: “I won’t go into this term’s issues here.” One is left wondering: why not? Aren’t “issues” concerning the politics of embodiment precisely the ones that should be under consideration in an essay framed as an investigation of Lady Gaga’s position with respect to “biodeterminism”? How could an assessment of the strategic value of essentialist claims possibly be undertaken, as Cohen seeks to do, without even considering the ways racial logics operate in the lyrics? What might this critical abstention say about the status of racialized identity as a subject of political contestation within emergent queer feminist formations such as gaga feminism?

To begin to address these questions, one might consider that the lyrics quoted above underscore a relation of continuity between civil rights struggles of the past and LGBTQ activism today. In this way, “Born this Way” implicitly references a cultural progress narrative that marks the contemporary campaign against homophobia as the latest frontier in an ongoing struggle to finally deliver on the egalitarian ideal of “liberty and justice for all.” The appearance of the term “orient” in the song reinforces this connection in a punning reference that simultaneously cues both racialized identity and the idea of sexuality as the orientation of desire. More specifically, these lines gesture toward the historical development of constitutional antidiscrimination doctrine in the United States according to which discrimination that penalizes individuals on the basis of “immutable characteristics” is judged most harshly. In this way, “Born this Way” would seem to leverage the popular intuition that people should not suffer disadvantage on the basis of aspects of themselves they do not choose and cannot change to pitch a broad appeal for tolerance and social acceptance.

But there is also a sense in which the lyrics gesture at *denaturalization* as a strategy for confronting marginalization and social exclusions. In deploying racial slang over more neutral terminology, the lyrics render conspicuous the socially constructed nature of racial and ethnic markers. This unsettling effect is intensified by the jarring asymmetry of the assembled terms (“black” “chola” “Lebanese” “orient”). Rather than exploring the curious presence of these particular words in a song that quite self-consciously presents itself as an anthem of tolerance, most commentators have ignored these lyrics altogether, as if they represent nothing more than a momentary rhetorical lapse in the otherwise progressive sentiment the lyrics convey. This minimizing approach is problematic on several scores. At one level, the failure to address the use of these terms encourages their further uncritical circulation. At the same time, this lack of engagement carries with it the pernicious suggestion that a small measure of racial insensitivity might be a fair price to pay for such a resounding show of support for gay rights. Most troubling of all may be the implication that an interrogation of the politics of racialized identity has nothing to contribute to the formulation of a new feminist vision.

How might a closer engagement with the politics of race challenge the terms in which a new feminist ideal like gaga feminism is being elaborated? Toward an answer, I offer in these final pages some reflections on Lady Gaga’s two video collaborations with pop-diva eminence Beyoncé. As

noted above, little consideration has been given to racialized embodiment and the politics of racialized identity in the voluminous commentary on Lady Gaga's music, videos, and performances. This neglect attests in part to the privileged status of whiteness as an unmarked category—a privilege that legitimates denial of the operation of racialization in the work of white artists generally. But in the case of commentary on Lady Gaga in particular, the inattention to race also suggests an unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of racialized hierarchies being recreated in queer new feminist worlds. In the following discussion of Lady Gaga's two video collaborations with Beyoncé, I consider how racialized bodies register in a queer feminist visual economy that takes creative self-invention as its highest value. Here, I contend that while a queer antiessentialist sensibility engenders a celebratory discourse of play and possibility, when it comes to gender and sexual identity, this same attitude readily colludes with a facile postracialism to deny racialization's enduring effects.

Beyoncé's "Video Phone" video debuted in November 2009. The song itself underwhelmed many critics; one reviewer called it "about as innovative a rotary dial up" (Farber). The video generated significantly more



Figure 1: Beyoncé. "Video Phone." *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce*. Columbia, 2009. Music Video. Dir. Hype Williams. Images accessed at: http://30frames.blogspot.com/2009_11_01_archive.html



Figure 2: At left, Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1862–63) (Louvre, Paris). At right, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga in *Video Phone* video. Images accessed at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Google_Art_Project.3.jpg, <http://www.glogster.com/michelle97/beyonce/g-6n3t2flmtilt0s9mij4ioa0>

excitement. Commentators were particularly enthusiastic about Beyoncé’s cutting-edge “fashion efforts” (Odell; Montgomery, 2009). The conceptual ambitions of the video were addressed only in passing, if at all, despite the centrality in the video of “a bunch of guys with video cameras for heads”—a playful evocation of Laura Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze” apparently lost on most observers. The same might be said of the video’s discomfiting visual references to Abu Ghraib (Peterson, 2009; McCaffrey and Vicks, 2010).

While training their attention narrowly on the video’s aesthetics, critics expressed disappointment that the collaboration between the reigning pop divas of the day had not yielded something more evidently avant-garde, a failure attributed to the fact that the video was, in the end, more Beyoncé than Gaga (*Daily Mail*; Farber, 2009). This reception itself raises questions about the distribution of critical authority in the gaga feminist imaginary: who is authorized to speak, to do, and to go gaga—and what role might racialization play in establishing a subject as a self-authorizing agent rather than a mere tool? This question begs consideration precisely because the video is all about color, offering up a visually stimulating play in contrasts. Lady Gaga makes a cameo midway through, strutting and writhing in mirror-step with Beyoncé. Performing in identical white leotards and elbow-length white gloves against a muted gray background, their flesh itself becomes the adornment that brings the vibrancy of contrasting color to the visual frame.



Figure 3: Lady Gaga feat. Beyoncé. “Telephone.” The Fame Monster. Interscope, 2010. Music Video. Dir. Jonas Åkerlund. Images accessed at: <http://www.towleroad.com/2010/03/watch-lady-gaga-and-beyonce-telephone-video.html> <http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/lady-gaga/images/19363485/title/lady-gaga-ft-beyonce-telephone-music-video-screencaps-screencap>

In Sander Gilman’s well-known article “The Hottentot and the Prostitute,” Gilman describes the “ubiquitous” reliance in 18th and 19th century European art on the figure of the black servant to “mark the presence of illicit sexual activity” (79). But in the “Video Phone” video, we see a striking reversal of the dynamic Gilman identifies, whereby Beyoncé’s supreme command of racialized heterosexiness becomes the staging ground for the appearance of Lady Gaga as a queer figure. In an interview, Lady Gaga explained that when she agreed to do the video, she told Beyoncé: ‘I don’t want to show up in some frickin’ hair bow and be fashion Gaga in your video.’” Instead, Lady Gaga told Beyoncé: “I want to do *you*’.” (Vena, 2009). Lady Gaga’s almost comically absurd attempt to “do” Beyoncé in the video has the effect of aligning Beyoncé with the natural and Gaga with the performative. In contrast, Beyoncé’s racialized body appears as a sign of the decidedly un-queer, functioning as the backdrop against which a feminist politics of self-fashioning struts to the fore. If, as Halberstam suggests, Lady Gaga represents “the end of normal,” then Beyoncé in the video gets cast as its lingering presence. Several critics commenting on the “Video Phone” video observed that Lady Gaga had to “tone down the crazy” and act like “a normal pop star” while visiting “B’s world” (Cady, 2009). Or as music critic Sasha Frere-Jones (2011) puts it: “Beyoncé Knowles is America’s Sweetheart, and she does transgressive about as well as Matthew

McConaughey does lawyerly. We don't buy misbehavior any stronger than an appletini from Beyoncé." These comments stand in striking counterpoint to what Robyn Wiegman (2012) characterizes as "an increasing critical insistence" on drawing "a kind of zero-degree analogy between racialized difference and homosexuality" (334). But in the queer new world of gaga feminism, the normative is abjected—for to be normal is to be not yet transformed. Whereas gender and sexual identity are the privileged sites for the expression of playful transgression and creativity, racialized bodies represent the natural, that is, the pre-re-fashioned. In this way, racialized bodies register as an identitarian hangover, the drag of the past, a mark of the bodily real in a queer universe that celebrates invention and indeterminacy.

In March 2010, the video for Lady Gaga's single "Telephone" premiered, quickly garnering praise as a masterpiece of subversive artistry. In the video, Lady Gaga plays a prison inmate who gets bailed out of jail by her presumptive girlfriend (Beyoncé) after some steamy scenes behind bars including an extended kiss between Lady Gaga and a fellow prisoner played by performance artist Heather Cassils. Once out of jail, the two divas drive across the desert, making a pit stop at a roadside diner to fatally poison a man understood to be Beyoncé's (other) lover. The video concludes with our antiheroines racing through the desert *Thelma-and-Louise* style, police sirens blaring behind them.

On first view, Beyoncé seems cast in the video as Lady Gaga's partner-in-crime. But it is clear from the start that this is no equal partnership. The initial prison scenes establish Lady Gaga as a cultural provocateur set on challenging traditional assumptions about sexuality and gender identity. In contrast, even cast as a murderess, Beyoncé's character reads as comparatively conventional. This effect is produced in part by Beyoncé's exaggerated performance of ingenuousness throughout the video. Indeed, Beyoncé's mannerisms of innocence are so affected that her character becomes not so much the partner in crime as Lady Gaga's straight man. That is, we might see Beyoncé performing a kind of gender and sexuality drag that reveals the implicit racialization of both categories. Viewed in this light, Beyoncé's performance becomes an invitation to experience what José Muñoz (1999) calls "disidentification." As Muñoz explains, "disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (31).

To comprehend the subversive possibilities of Beyoncé's performance, however, one must be willing to relinquish the pleasure of reading the video as a fantasy of postracial sisterly solidarity. Beyoncé is "unthinkable" as a straight man not only because of the assumptions of the dominant culture, but also because of a resistance even within a queer feminist framework to engaging racialized difference as a site of oppositionality. In a moving essay that examines the work of Beyoncé and Mary J. Blige in the context of "black feminist surrogation," Daphne Brooks demonstrates how each artist's performance imagines "new ways of moving and singing under duress" (201). While gaga feminists valorize radical self-invention, Beyoncé's straight man performance draws attention to strategies of subversion available to those operating within conditions of constraint.

In the preceding, I suggested that an unreflexive antiessentialism produces unduly cramped and dismissive readings of "Born this Way." More distressingly, a phobic regard for essentialist claims produces an aversion to thinking a feminist future from the standpoint of those whose experience of embodied identity is as much one of subjection as subjectivity. In her 1990 essay "Postmodern Blackness," bell hooks (2013) observed that

racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated (1).

As part of this ongoing interrogation, we must challenge the way a new feminism premised on self-fashioning implicitly construes the demand to attend to racialization and its myriad persistent effects, including racism, as relics of the past. That is, as we contemplate new feminisms that pledge allegiance to self-creation, we should beware of valorizing the new at the expense of casting longtime but unfinished struggles against racial injustice as a temporal drag on the glamorous, "new" project of reinventing gender and sexuality. It is no doubt true, as Halberstam (2010) proclaims in the rousing, manifesto-style final pages of the book, that "the end of the old rings in a new set of possibilities" (148). And it is seductive, indeed, to think that in embracing new feminisms we might finally be released from reckoning with the issues that have so long troubled feminisms of old. In *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam underscores the point that

[G]aga feminism is a gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and the true; gaga feminism will abandon the norm the way a hiker might throw out her compass—once the compass has been lost, every direction is right, every path seems attractive, and getting lost becomes both a possibility and a pleasure (26).

In my experience, when the compass is lost, the first step most people take is backwards, turning around to go back the way they came. And so I am led to wonder to what extent our new feminisms really will stray from the beaten path? Is an insistence that a feminist formation is “new” really enough to provide release from the dilemmas and debates that have so consumed the old feminisms? Surely if we are to make a change, it will not be achieved by proclamation alone.

Notes

1. See Bauer (2010), Nyong’o (2010), Panagia (2010), Halberstam 2012. The online journal *Gaga Stigmata* regularly features commentary by established and emerging scholars.

2. The exception is Halberstam’s brilliant analysis of Lady Gaga’s “Telephone” video (61–64. See also Halberstam 2010).

3. See, e.g., Cochrane (2010), Williams (2010). For an extended and unusually insightful discussion, see Durbin et al. (2010).

4. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/lady-power/>

5. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/lady-gaga-hope-for-the-homely/24961>

6. See Ariel Levy (2005), *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, for an intriguing discussion of women’s role in the popularization of “raunch culture.”

7. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hapbpmFSTOo>.

8. Written by Stefani Germanotta, Jeppe Larusen, Fernando Garibay, and Paul Blair.

9. <http://gagajournal.blogspot.com/2011/07/traductor-traditore-untranslating-born.html>

10. Durbin and Halberstam (2012, 138–9) provide an alternate lineage for Lady Gaga to insist that she is pursuing a project that is much more radical in ways than Madonna’s.

11. See Fuss (1989) for a classic discussion of these debates.

12. See Butler for an extended discussion of Beauvoir’s use of the idea of the body as a situation. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler charges Beauvoir with uncritically assuming the “facticity” of the body, that is, with assuming that the situated body is always already a sexed body.

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