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“IF I WAS A MAN, THEN I’D BE THE MAN”:
UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER, RACE, AND SOCIAL CLASS
IN POSTFEMINIST POPULAR CULTURE

BY
JACLYN GRIFFITH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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OF

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis is an analysis of the political messaging used by pop singer-songwriters Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift to construct their careers. Specifically, it focuses on how these two artists use their experiences of gender, race, and social class to actively effect change and empower themselves, and what expectations audiences have for them to do so and why. Grande and Swift experience sexism as women in a patriarchy, but both use their positions as subjugated members of society to create a profit and satisfy the public's demand that they take socially progressive political stances, which earns them financial and cultural capital. Grande fails to be actively anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-classist in her work because she fails to give credit to groups from which she takes both material and nonmaterial resources. She is empowered by the cultures of people of color by directly taking lyrics, melodies, and images, and she is empowered by women who do not adhere to normative standards of beauty and sexuality by claiming to be empowered by the things they lack. While she does not actively oppress these groups, she does little to liberate them. The major flaw of Swift's attempts is that in trying to maintain her position as an autobiographical pop songwriter, she centers her own experiences as a wealthy white woman in songs that could be more nuanced and more potentially empowering to members of the marginalized groups to which she is an ally if she were to step out of the narrative entirely. I argue that it is unfair to dismiss celebrities as self-serving opportunists because they live and work within a neoliberal state that revolves around self-serving capitalist interests that oppress women, people of color, and working class people. The lack of assistance from the state is what requires celebrities to release political statements and songs. Audiences expect

individual artists to release progressive political messages because the United States government, in the era of postfeminism, refuses to do so.

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To Emilie Zaslow, for starting this whole thing in a windowless classroom on Monday and Wednesday mornings in One Pace Plaza. To Nanny, for inspiring this whole thing in an apartment in John Wesley Village where we listened to the *Chicago* soundtrack when I was just barely old enough to understand what I was singing.

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Here's to starting the memoir.

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Introduction

“I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.”

—Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

The following thesis is built upon the principles described in this statement from Beverly Daniel Tatum, as it is an analysis of the degrees to which two highly public figures who claim to have progressive political values enact those values. This study consists of sociocultural, textual, and critical analyses of the star texts of pop singer-songwriters Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift. Star texts are the discursive public constructions of a celebrity, comprised of performances, promotional appearances, interviews, photographs, gossip publications, and any other texts that help craft the “narrative blend of consumerism, success, and ordinariness” defining an individual (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 48). In the context of this study, the albums released by Grande

(*Sweetener*, 2018, and *thank u, next*, 2019) and Swift (*reputation*, 2017, and *Lover*, 2019) since 2016 are part of their star texts, including their music videos, lyrics, interviews, and album promotion from before and after 2016. All of these albums debuted at number 1 on the Billboard album chart, confirming the mass appeal and commercial success of these two artists. Elizabeth Ellcessor (2012) argues that our traditional understanding of star texts must be updated to account for the impact of social media. A star in the modern age “functions through connection,” and the personal connections made by stars as social media agents personify the star to their fans (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 48). In this study, any relevant social media posts by these artists are considered as part of their star texts and worthy of examination. When pertinent, analyses of sound are also incorporated to examine how the use of genre and sounds may enhance, inhibit, or complicate the politics of a song. These elements will be used in this project to provide an analysis of how Grande and Swift use their experiences of gender, race, and social class to construct their careers in a neoliberal postfeminist media culture.

Tatum’s conception of active anti-racism provides the framework within which I performed the following analysis. For the purposes of this study, I take the liberty of expanding Tatum’s “conveyor belt” metaphor beyond race to issues of gender and social class as well. I aim to provide an argument as to where on these conveyor belts Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift stand—to what degree are they complicit in the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” named by bell hooks (1984, p. 51), and to what degree are they challenging it? Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift have incorporated some version of feminism into their personal brands, with each speaking openly in interviews about their support of gender equality. This rhetoric has earned them the titled of “empowered

women,” a phrase commonly given to pop stars in postfeminist media culture (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). This study also examines from where these artists derive their power: what role do their own experiences of gender, race, and social class play in their personal empowerment? More importantly, are these artists able to support those who do not share their privileges with regard to gender, race, and class?

Lastly, this thesis notes the shifting expectations of audiences before and after the election of Donald Trump and the resulting Me Too movement. In recent years, some audiences have craved public statements of political positionings from major celebrities, and this thesis interrogates why audiences are so hungry for this particular source of political endorsement and rhetoric. Given that contemporary audiences generally approve of artists who make socially progressive political statements, Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift gain financial and cultural capital in exchange for their public political stances. Pulling from Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser’s work in *Commodity Activism*, I argue that these artists simultaneously challenge and benefit from the neoliberal postfeminist media culture in which they are living and working, further complicating where they stand on Tatum’s conveyor belt.

Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) note that social action in contemporary culture is “characterized by the increasing presence of Hollywood celebrities, pop icons, and corporate moguls” because these figures have taken the place of the state, thus “proliferating private forms of welfare and distribution” (p. 93). The era in which Grande and Swift are currently building their highly successful careers has been dubbed “postfeminism” by scholar Rosalind Gill (2016)—an era characterized by neoliberal sensibilities believed to lead to an individual woman’s personal and financial success.

This same era is contradictorily led by a president who uses explicitly sexist rhetoric and repudiates the feminine (Gentile, 2018)—a president who makes clear that the state will not speak out on behalf of its marginalized citizens to protect their vulnerabilities. Thus, pop stars like Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift are asked by audiences to fill a role previously reserved for the state. The following thesis analyzes precisely how they are fulfilling this role given to them by a postfeminist, neoliberal (media) culture.

This study analyzes the star texts of Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift through a feminist media studies lens. Feminist media studies assumes that gender is a category constructed by culture, rather than a biological determinant, thus rendering necessary sociocultural analyses of gender (Harvey, 2020). Although an audience analysis was not performed for this particular study, the work of feminist media scholars has informed the assumptions made in this study about reception and audience interpretation, especially that of young girls consuming popular media (see Zaslow, 2009; Zeisler, 2016; Gill, 2003; Levy, 2005; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012; Brown, 2012; Jackson and Goddard, 2015; and Peterson, 2010). Textual analysis will be used as a primary method in this study, as is standard in feminist media studies because “scrutinizing how audio-visual texts frame and organize stories through their content and structure—including what they leave out—can reveal how we make meaning of our social world” (Harvey, 2020, p. 16). Thus, this study’s discussions of Grande’s and Swift’s media texts—including lyrics, music videos, marketing materials, public statements, autobiographies, social media posts, etc.—aim to examine how these media texts may construct our culture, and specifically our understandings of feminism and empowerment.

The interdisciplinary work of feminist media scholars Rosalind Gill (2003, 2008) and Emilie Zaslow (2009, 2018) have primarily informed the methodology of this study. I have chosen to analyze these artists' star texts through a critique of neoliberal feminism because this particular brand of feminism is ubiquitous in the media culture in which Grande and Swift began and continue to expand their careers, using Gill's and Zaslow's critiques of neoliberal feminism as a model. Gill (2003) and Zaslow (2009) critique mainstream representations of feminism for their inflated valuing of individual choices and public displays of sexuality as avenues to empowerment for girls and women. Neoliberal feminism, these scholars argue, views a wealthy woman as a pinnacle feminist, as she has made the so-called "correct" choices for herself in order to become empowered. The contemporary popular culture landscape is "rooted in a neoliberal language of choice" (Zaslow, 2009, p. 3). Zaslow (2009) argues this "choice" rhetoric characterizes public understandings of mainstream feminism and femininity, which offer girls and women:

A sense that they can choose when to be girly and when to be powerful, when to be mother and when to be professional, when to be sexy for male pleasure and when to be sexy for their own pleasure. (p. 3)

This neoliberal language of choice, however, fails to offer girls and women the tools to dismantle systems of oppression (Zaslow, 2009) and instead highlights the false idea that individual self-expression is the ultimate liberating force (Peterson and Lamb, 2012). Pop stars are believed by audiences to be empowered agents who actively adopt hypersexualized personas as a form of self-expression, according to Gill (2008). Gill (2008) also notes that women in media are no longer depicted as passive objects of the

male gaze; rather, they are depicted as active, independent, and sexually empowered, but still, they adhere to the normative standards of the traditional male gaze. Zaslow (2009) notes the intertwining of the “sex sells” imperative of the music industry with the neoliberal feminist discourse that equates empowerment with wealth and sexuality, which leads to large profits for hypersexualized pop stars and, as a result, a public understanding of them as feminist women for fans and reviewers (p. 62).

The following discussions will demonstrate how Grande and Swift exist in a media culture that “encourages girls and women to identify as both traditionally feminine objects *and* as powerful feminist agents” (Zaslow, 2009, p. 3, emphasis original). Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift were chosen as case studies for several reasons, not least of which is their massive commercial success, as demonstrated by their chart-topping album sales. Grande and Swift are understood by audiences to be not just empowered people, but empowered women—they are explicitly described as women who challenge sexism and injustice. Both of these singer-songwriters have been publicly praised in relation to their gender, and they have given acceptance speeches and interviews in which they have spoken openly about their experiences as women. In 2018, Ariana Grande was named Billboard’s Woman of the Year, and in 2019, Swift was chosen as Billboard’s Woman of the Decade. These awards are presented to “women in the music industry who have made significant contributions to the business and who, through their work and continued success, inspire generations of women to take on increasing responsibilities within the field” (“Woman of the Year,” 2007). These two stars receive varying levels of praise and criticism from fans and journalists when they either succeed or fail to fulfill the role of the neoliberal sexual subject described by Rosalind Gill (2003). The neoliberal sexual

subject is a young, heterosexual, normatively attractive woman who publicly “plays with her sexual power and is ever ‘up for it’” (Gill, 2003, p. 103). Though many successful women pop stars walk this line (including Beyoncé, Lizzo, Cardi B, and Miley Cyrus), Grande and Swift have found success in the music industry consistently enough throughout the last decade to provide a rich repertoire from which to pull. They each have been varying levels of progressive and not throughout their careers. They each contribute a nuanced vision of social progressivism to the pop culture landscape and speak openly about it in the press. They also share similar privileges in terms of social class, race, gender identity, and career success, making the parallel between their versions of intersectional feminism easier to draw. They also vary from each other—although Grande and Swift are peers, their personal branding is starkly distinct, which provides a more comprehensive vision of the contemporary landscape for readers of this study. Namely, Grande’s public persona is dramatically more hypersexualized than Swift’s. They were also selected because they have been consistently releasing full-length albums for several years before and after the presidential election of Donald Trump; as will be discussed throughout this study, the 2016 presidential election was a pivotal moment in American history that influenced rhetoric within and about popular culture. In addition, this study builds on my past research (see Griffith, 2017), which analyzed the contradictions in the sexual representation of these two artists and the public response to those contradictions.

This study aims to interrogate several questions related to the political, social, and economic understandings in contemporary popular culture in the United States. It uses primarily a neoliberal feminist framework of analysis because the two artists selected for analysis—who have been highly commercially successful and consistent in their album

releases before and after the election of Donald Trump—maintain public personae as women who are individually empowered in spite of the disempowerment of their gender as a whole. Gender identity, however, does not exist in a vacuum; thus the intersections of social class and race are considered in this study within the framework of neoliberal feminism. To place these analyses in a cultural context, the political and social shifts of the last decade are incorporated into the following discussion. Ultimately, this study questions how two successful singer-songwriters use their experiences of gender, race, and social class to portray themselves as empowered women in contemporary popular culture.

Literature Review

The historical context of any project is imperative, and because of the political nature of the following analysis, the landscape in which Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift are building their careers is particularly important to examine. This thesis is an examination of the ways that these two popular artists use their gender, race, and class to portray themselves as empowered women in mass media. Discussions of gender, race, and class, and the privilege that comes with certain forms of these identities, has perhaps never been more contested in mass media than in recent years. Grande and Swift construct their public personas as empowered women within the third wave of feminism (often referred to as “postfeminism;” see Gill, 2016), which has been influenced by neoliberalism, consumer culture, the election of an American president who openly objectifies women’s bodies, and the resulting Me Too movement.

Political & Cultural Shifts in Feminism in the Last Four Years

In 2016, Republican candidate Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States, replacing Democrat Barack Obama. In August of 2016, President Barack Obama wrote an article for *Glamour* magazine in which he called himself a feminist and discussed his hope that the United States would become a more gender equal nation (Obama, 2016). During his two terms in office (2009-2017), President Obama attempted to implement feminist policies in the United States, including launching the “It’s On Us” campaign against campus sexual assault, supporting equal pay for equal work through legislation such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, establishing the White House Council on Women and Girls, and appointing women leaders to his Cabinet and White House staff as well as two female Supreme Court justices (Office of the White House

Press Secretary, 2016 & 2015). With the 2016 presidential election came what Gentile (2018) has called “a repudiation of the feminine,” as Donald Trump used sexist rhetoric to maintain his “cult of hypermasculinity” in his position as president (p. 699). Sexist language discriminates against women and belittles and trivializes activities associated with women (Darweesh and Abdullah, 2016). Since long before his election but continuing to the present, Trump has publicly objectified girls and woman in his rhetoric; additionally, he has been accused of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment by multiple girls and women (Valenti, 2019). Banet-Weiser (2018) notes that as journalists covered Trump’s rhetoric, objectivity infiltrated their reports, thus perpetuating his statements without challenging or criticizing their hegemony.

Mass media provide pivotal information about sexual norms, values, and behaviors within a culture (Karsay et. al., 2018). The prevalence of female sexual objectification in media, including political media, then, shapes these dominant ideologies. The media sexually objectify bodies “whenever a person’s body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from his or her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing him or her” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175). Objectification relegates certain people to objects and others to whole beings; traditionally, and overwhelmingly, women are degraded as objects, and men maintain their personhood in a hegemonic position. Objectification theory, as defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), describes how the mass media leads girls and women to adopt and internalize an observers’ perspective as their own view of themselves. Internalizing this view—or gaze—can lead to habitual body monitoring, which can increase women’s likelihood of experiencing shame, anxiety, demotivation,

depression, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, and a lack of awareness about internal bodily states (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 173).

Three weeks before the 2016 presidential election, a 2005 recording was released of Donald Trump describing his believed entitlement to women's bodies. In the recording, he says, "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything...Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" ("Donald Trump's taped comments," 2016). The moment this tape was released—just before the general election, after months and years of sexist, objectifying, and ultimately dehumanizing statements and actions from Trump—was arguably the epitome of Donald Trump's sexual objectification of girls and women. He was elected president the following month.

Yet there was a prodigious reaction to Trump's sexist rhetoric and his election. On the day following his inauguration ceremony, January 21, 2017, approximately 5 million people participated in a Women's March in the United States alone, and there were additional demonstrations around the world (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017). Many marchers wore pink hats crocheted to resemble cat ears and called them "pussyhats," in response to Trump's "grab 'em by the pussy" recording (Hartocollis & Alcindor, 2017). The Women's March protests were the beginning of a presidential term marked with active feminist resistance to the president's sexist rhetoric (Fisher, 2019).

In 2017, the Me Too movement began to receive coverage in mainstream media. Gibson et. al. (2019) suggest that the election of Donald Trump ignited the movement because "many women were probably simmering in isolation with silent anguish and anger that...a person recording making fun of sexually harassing women had been

elected to the highest office in the land” (p. 221). Ten years before the movement was covered by major news sources, it was founded on MySpace by an African American woman named Tarana Burke (Gibson et. al., 2019). Burke encouraged black and Hispanic girls and women in her local community to come forward with their experiences of sexual misconduct within the Me Too movement, which she began in order to support them (Garcia, 2017). On October 17, 2017, nearly a year after Donald Trump’s election, actress Alyssa Milano asked her Twitter followers to respond to her tweet with the words “Me Too” if they had ever experienced sexual assault or harassment.¹ The tweet received 30,000 replies within moments, and in 48 hours, there were more than 12 million reactions and posts on Snapchat, Facebook, and other social media sites (Gibson et. al., 2019). The hashtag #MeToo was then established, and it was tweeted nearly a million times in two days, along with stories from women about their experiences of sexual assault or harassment (“More than 12M,” 2017).

The celebrity involvement in the Me Too movement certainly expanded its reach. In the months following Milano’s original tweet, dozens of famous men were accused of sexual misconduct ranging from workplace sexual harassment to rape. Some of these celebrity men included Harvey Weinstein, Louie C.K., Matt Lauer, Kevin Spacey, and Mario Batali (Gibson et. al., 2019). A year after the uproar of the movement, in October 2018, the New York Times reported that the Me Too movement had “brought down 201 powerful men” and nearly half of their replacements were women (Carlsen et. al., 2018). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which investigates complaints of

¹ Neither Ariana Grande nor Taylor Swift initially participated in public conversation about the Me Too movement.

workplace sexual harassment and discrimination, saw a 12 percent increase in complaints filed in the year following the national spark of the Me Too movement (Chiwaya, 2018).

Thus the era in which Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift are dominating the pop music charts is an era characterized by a dramatic shift in politics and culture. As women artists who have embraced empowerment and feminism—in varying forms, as discussed later—as central themes in the construction of their art and their brands, Grande and Swift are inevitably performing feminism in reaction to a women’s movement that is massively publicized but also informed and actively resisted by the actions and rhetoric of the United States president. The mainstream pop culture feminism of the Obama era has been critiqued for its neoliberal and commercial (pseudo)feminism, discussed in the following sections. But if the Me Too movement is any indication, then the sexism demonstrated by Donald Trump and endorsed by voters may spark a more revolutionary version of feminism.

Evolving Understandings of Progressivism within Feminism

The rise of the Me Too movement is situated in feminism’s third wave.² Feminist media scholars often refer to third wave feminism as “postfeminism.” In 2016, Rosalind Gill argued that the term “postfeminism” remains a necessary category for current scholarship about modern feminism. Postfeminism, by definition, implies that women have progressed so much already that if any woman is not successful in this era, it must be her own improper decisions that led her to failure, rather than patriarchal oppression. In the early 2000s it was widely believed that women had progressed “enough” that we

² Or, some argue, the beginning of a fourth wave; for the purposes of this study, I consider it the third wave (see Maclaran, 2015).

were post-feminism, rendering the movement unnecessary and outdated. When feminist media scholars use the term “postfeminism,” they do so knowing that this neoliberal belief in meritocracy is untrue, and that structural sexism is still very real. Gill (2016) reminds readers that the rising popularity of mainstream feminism in recent years has occurred “alongside and in tandem with intensified misogyny” (p. 610). Postfeminism is therefore an important concept for scholars to continue examining critically, and Gill concludes unfortunately that we most certainly have not reached an era of “post-postfeminism” in which sexism has actually been eliminated. The postfeminist ideals critiqued by Gill (and others) are related to third wave feminist ideals, thus to properly contextualize the feminism expressed by Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift in the late 2010s, it is necessary to describe the characteristics of third wave feminism, which developed both because of and in contrast to second wave feminism.

The second wave of feminism occurred from the 1960s to 1980s and had principal slogans and philosophies including “Sisterhood is Powerful” and “The Personal is Political.” Both of these phrases communicated the collective activism and questioning of systemic gender inequities that were key elements of activism in the second wave of feminism (Zaslow, 2018). Women’s personal dissatisfaction and inferiority to men were critiqued in relation to greater social structures that historically and contemporarily oppressed women, and the powerful sisterhood between women allowed for the recognition of shared experiences and inequalities they all were battling (Griffith, 2017).

The third wave of feminism is generally considered to have begun in the mid-1990s and continue to the present day, with postfeminist falling under its umbrella. In 1992, Rebecca Walker wrote an article for *Ms. Magazine*. Titled, “Becoming the Third

Wave,” the essay announced Walker’s decision to “figure out what it means to be a part of the Third Wave of feminism” and called for other young women to do the same (Walker, 2007, p. 400). Walker’s article brought attention to the potential of a new women’s movement. Self-identified third wave feminists of the 1990s and early 2000s defined the goals of their new wave, noting priorities that the second wave did not incorporate (Freedman, 2007). Journalists Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, in their 2000 book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, insisted that racial justice, queer rights, sex-positive narratives, and the reclamation of misogynistic words are essential elements of third wave feminism, which aims to be more intersectional than was the second wave.

Perhaps the primary way in which third wave feminism differs from its predecessor is its understanding of the relationship between politics and the self. Characteristic of the third wave is an increased focus on individualism rather than the collectivism that stood as a pillar of the second wave. This shift has been widely attributed to the influence of the era’s political and social changes on feminism. Many have argued that one of the most significant influences of social thought on feminism is neoliberalism, a concept that became widely accepted in the United States in the 1980s, particularly during President Reagan’s administration (see Zaslow, 2018, Zeisler, 2016, Griffith, 2017, and Steger & Roy, 2010). Neoliberalism encourages the individual’s responsibility to self-govern, self-discipline, self-regulate, and self-enterprise on the journey to success, regardless of systemic inhibitors. Its foundation is the belief that any individual who chooses to work hard will reach economic prosperity. Neoliberalism “emphasize[s] individualism” and perpetuates the meritocratic myth that a person’s

economic fate is always deserved and is not substantially affected by social or political policy or structural inequities in gender, race, or class (Budgeon, 2011). This conservative philosophy of the 1980s manifested not only in economic policy, but also in the public understanding and performance of feminism in subsequent decades (Griffith, 2017).

Rosalind Gill (2017) discusses how the cultural landscape in recent years has become “even more fraught and complicated” as neoliberalism has “deepened its hold,” developing from:

a macro-political and economic rationality with a specific range of influence, to a central organizing ethic of society that shapes the way we live, think and feel about ourselves and each other...Underpinned by largely unquestioned ideas about choice, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy, neoliberalism has insinuated itself into “the nooks and crannies of everyday life” (Littler, 2017, p. 2). (p. 608)

Likely influenced in part by the progress made by the feminists who came before them, third wave feminists have replaced the second wave’s belief in collective social change with a focus on individual choice. In the third wave, it is commonly believed that women have progressed so much already that if any woman is not successful in this era, it must be her own improper decisions that led her to failure, rather than patriarchal oppression (Rottenberg, 2014). This is the basis of the term “postfeminism,” which deems the need for a collective women’s movement unnecessary. Feminism, then, becomes a lifestyle, enacted through everyday choices, rather than a political movement. It is believed to be constituted of individual women making empowered choices, rather than challenging

structural sexism. This neoliberal belief in women's meritocracy differs greatly from the second wave's attempt to disrupt political, social, and cultural structures that privileged men over women.

Neoliberal feminism is visible in many forms within the third wave. Zaslow (2018) draws a comparison between major players in the each feminist movement and the type of feminism they endorse; in 1984, bell hooks defined feminism as, "A movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," whereas in 2014, *Seventeen* magazine had the social positioning to define feminism itself, describing it as, "Being confident, embracing your femininity however you choose to, and just being *you*" (Zaslow, 2018, p. 58). The shift in feminism from a political and social movement to something as simple and individualistic as making your own choices demonstrates the way that neoliberalism in American government and ideology has infiltrated the third wave of feminism. Ultimately, in the same way that neoliberal economics dismiss the structural, class-based inhibitors that prevent individuals from being successful, neoliberal feminism dismisses the structural, gender-based inhibitors that allow men a clearer path to success than women.

Current COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, in her 2013 best-selling book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, identified individual will and choices as the key to a woman's success in the workplace. The "lean in" philosophy of third wave feminism that Sandberg coined blames inequality in the workplace on female employees rather than on the workplace systems designed only by and for white, straight, cisgender, economically privileged men. Thus, Sandberg's work fails to uphold the second wave belief that the personal is political, or to critique the structural inequities inhibiting

women in the workplace (Griffith, 2017). Sandberg presents the fight for gender equity as a personal fight, overlooking how “challenging and dismantling patriarchy is at the core of contemporary feminist struggle” (hooks, 2013). The way Sandberg advises individual women to choose their way to the top rather than to work toward a system that benefits all women is typical of neoliberal feminism in the third wave. Sandberg is a billionaire and does not question structural patriarchy, which made media outlets enthusiastically willing to include her self-proclaimed “feminist manifesto” in headlines and lead stories; her popularity was ubiquitous as the book spent sixteen weeks as a *Times* bestseller. bell hooks (2013) notes:

Sandberg offers readers no understanding of what men must do to unlearn sexist thinking. At no point in *Lean In* does she let readers know what would motivate patriarchal white males in a corporate environment to change their belief system or the structures that support gender inequality. (para. 7)

Sandberg is not questioning existing structures, simply asking to be let in, and her neoliberal rhetoric and suggested strategies work specifically for herself and other wealthy, white women who do not question male status (Griffith, 2017). She is easily accepted by mainstream media perhaps because she is the ideal feminist for modern patriarchy: she is progressive without questioning hegemony.

Sandberg’s version of feminism is an example of the postfeminism critiqued by Rosalind Gill (2016). This way of thinking—the idea that individual women simply need to make the right choices in order to overcome patriarchal systems, rather than challenging the systems themselves for being sexist—Gill (2016) warns, can make way for a more pernicious form of misogyny because patriarchy can be blamed on women

who make the “wrong” choices and therefore do not succeed. When individual women who are successful receive public praise for making—very specifically—empowered and feminist choices, it becomes more difficult for feminists to prove that gender inequity persists, to prove that a movement for women’s liberation is indeed still necessary. Female celebrities are particularly powerful models for neoliberal feminism because they are individual women who have found the personal success—financial and otherwise—that is commended by both neoliberal feminism and patriarchy.

Dichotomous Understandings of Sexual Empowerment within Feminism

The neoliberal frame in which third wave feminism sits influences the modern mainstream understanding of what constitutes a truly feminist version of female sexuality. In order to interrogate this understanding, it is necessary to first consider the second wave feminist understandings of female sexuality.

There was a dichotomy in philosophy between feminist leaders of the second wave concerning what became known as the “sex wars.” Feminists struggled to determine what a nuanced and empowered manifestation of female sexuality should look like. Second wave feminists were classified as either “sex-positive” or “sex-negative,” debating whether sex work, pornography, and other forms of female public sexuality empowered women or degraded them. Sex-positive feminists believed that regarding all displays of female sexuality as degrading was yet another form of oppressing women’s sexual expression and therefore an extension of patriarchy. Sex-negative feminists warned that the same displays were an extension of men’s sexual dominance over women and of the male gaze (Levy, 2005).

The discrepancy between sex-positive and sex-negative feminists remains

tangible in the third wave of feminism and in what Gail Dines (2010) calls our “pornified culture” (TEDx Talks, 2015). The rise of the Internet caused a “revolution” that made pornography more accessible, affordable, and anonymous (Tedx Talks, 2015); some feminists, like Dines and Long (2011), argue that pornographic images “perpetuate myths of women’s unconditional sexual availability and object status, and thus undermine women’s rights to sexual autonomy, physical safety and economic and social equality” (para. 3). As the Internet made pornography more accessible, the volume of it increased dramatically, thus pornographers must go to extremes to break through industry competition. Pornography has influenced other aspects of mainstream culture and media, hypersexualizing everyday representations of sex and sexuality, according to Dines (2010). Dines (2010) argues:

Whether the case is Britney Spears writhing around almost naked or *Cosmopolitan* Magazine informing readers that porn could spice up their lives, women are increasingly being socialized in a culture that is hypersexualized... young women and girls, it seems, are increasingly celebrating their “empowering” sexual freedom by trying to look and act the part of a porn star. (p. XII)

Dines (2010) links the recent increase in access to pornography to the increase in hypersexualized images in mainstream media, including popular music, and warns that our “pornified” culture can affect our sexual identities (p. XII).

Other third wave feminists consider pornography and the opportunity for women to appear in pornography to be empowering and progressive expressions of female sexuality. They argue that condemning a woman’s choice to consume and appear in pornography is yet another form of patriarchal oppression and repression of female

sexuality (Levy, 2005). Present within this debate is the discourse of neoliberal feminism, with the latter group of feminists arguing that so long as a woman chooses to watch or participate in pornography, her choice should be considered a feminist act. Peterson and Lamb (2012) criticize the idea that individual women making sexual choices advances the feminist movement, stating, “The very act of expressing one’s sexual freedoms, because the expression of such is shaped by what is permissible and what is sexy (generally by men and marketers in this culture) may sometimes contribute to the oppression of others” (p. 760). For example, a female artist releasing a music video that films her entirely through the male gaze may promote her own career and commercial success, but it simultaneously upholds patriarchal standards of female beauty and sexuality for other women within her culture. The belief that choosing to participate in our “pornified culture” is feminist is rooted in the choice rhetoric that characterizes neoliberal feminism, dismissing systemic inhibitors just as neoliberalism does within economics. Peterson (2010) also writes, “Sexual behavior that feels sexually empowering for a particular girl may function to reproduce cultural and institutional constraints on women’s sexuality more broadly” (p. 308). What is empowering for an individual woman is not necessarily empowering for all women or for women as a whole, and therefore it is necessary to hesitate before deeming any individual hypersexual choice as an inherently feminist choice.

Rosalind Gill (2003) argues that contemporary representations of female sexuality in media illustrate “a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification” (p. 103). Sexual subjectification constructs (exclusively) young, slim, normatively beautiful, able-bodied, heterosexual female subjects who “actively choose to objectify themselves” (Gill,

2003, p. 104). Within the neoliberal context of the third wave of feminism, so long as a woman personally chooses to be a sexual object, her sexual objectification is considered a feminist choice and an example of sexual empowerment (Griffith, 2017). The former feminist view of sexual objectification as an oppressive act done to women by men has been replaced by the belief that “liberated” women are now choosing to objectify themselves, and this is believed to be a choice made by “active, confident, assertive female subjects”—ultimately, by true feminists and sexually empowered women (Gill, 2003, p. 104). A young, heterosexual woman with a specific normative body type who publicly “plays with her sexual power and is ever ‘up for it’” is regularly presented as an empowered figure of female sexuality within the third wave (Gill, 2003, p. 103).

This figure is problematic especially because it is exclusionary (Griffith, 2017). Gill later reiterates that the ideal sexual subject is white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, young, able-bodied, and lives up to “increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal” (Gill, 2008, p. 44). This cannot be a truly empowered feminine subject because this figure does not represent female pleasure but rather pleasure for the (hetero)normative male gaze. Gill (2008) argues, “Sexual subjectification, then, is a highly specific and exclusionary practice and sexual *pleasure* is actually irrelevant here; it is the power of *sexual attractiveness* that is important” (p. 44, emphasis original). Gill (2003) also warns that these representations of the “neoliberal feminine subject” may be “responses to feminism” as women find more success than ever in education and the workplace and therefore potentially threaten male hegemony (pp. 102-105). Sexual subjectification is a shift from “an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze,” in which the male gaze is internalized to convince women that

choosing to be sexual objects is in their own best feminist interest (Gill, 2003, p. 104). Sexual subjectification is a subtle extension of patriarchy meant to convince women that choosing to objectify their own bodies for the sake of male pleasure and hegemony is empowering.

Gill (2007) also critiques the way third wave feminism has “fetishized” autonomy and ostracized cultural influence (p. 73). When girls and young women make choices, Gill (2007) argues, their choices are affected by cultural influences and are not made “in conditions of their own making” (p. 72). For example, when a girl chooses to wear a sexualized item of clothing, she does so within the context of a culture that promotes a normative form of sexuality to which she is adhering (Griffith, 2017). Gill (2007) says that acknowledging cultural influence should not be “deemed shameful” (p. 73). Rather, it is a realistic way of viewing our choices, lest we forget:

Like the rest of the world, even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a “cultural dupe”—which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination. (Modleski, 2014, p. 45)

The neoliberal concept that anything a woman chooses for herself is inherently feminist solely because she chose it disregards the influence of a culture’s dominant ideologies—particularly patriarchal ideologies—on the woman’s (or anyone’s) decision-making process.

Young girls also struggle, when interpreting messages in pop music, to determine which hypersexualized choices are made authentically and completely willingly by a woman artist. Emilie Zaslow (2009), in her study of teen girls’ interpretations of what it

means to be female, feminine, and feminist coming of age in mid-2000s “girl power media culture,” describes the complexity girls face when a woman artist presents a sexualized image of herself. Girls tend to see only a “binary ruling: [a pop star] is either an authentic sexual subject and true to her own sexual identity or she is an inauthentic pawn of a culture industry that objectifies her” (Zaslow, 2009, p. 78). This binary does not give girls the space to recognize the “various image handlers” involved when a woman makes a hypersexualized choice; instead, girls try to figure out which artists are forced to be hypersexual and which choose to do so (Zaslow, 2009, p. 81). It is demonstrated to girl audiences, all across media but particularly in lyrics and visual representations, “that their sexuality is a tool and that they can, in this era, have control over their desire, sexuality, and sexual representation” (Zaslow, 2009, p. 81). So long as girls are told that woman artists are active agents who independently have the power to opt in or out of hypersexuality, girls are given neither the tools nor the exigent desire to challenge how women make choices within the music industry or the normative standards of beauty and sexuality influencing the choices of women in music and in their everyday lives.

It is worth noting that teen girls’ struggles to interpret the agency of pop artists is not exclusive to teen girls. This struggle does not derive from the ignorance or youth of teen girls; rather, it is simply because they are human, and so are the artists—it is impossible for adult men, too, to know which choices have been independently made by an artists. Further, it is arguably impossible to make any choice completely independently, as culture and dominant ideologies (generally determined by men and marketers, as Peterson and Lamb (2012) point out) influence our personal desires.

Zaslow (2009) discusses the conflicting messages expressed in pop music videos and the commodification of female sexuality within “girl power media culture,” which is an interpretation of feminism that has used “a neoliberal language of choice” when discussing representations of sexuality and sexual empowerment since the mid-1990s (p. 3). She argues:

As a commodified social movement, girl power media culture takes the third-wave [feminist] desire for power through sexuality and combines it with the capitalist “sex sells” imperative to produce a discourse in which sexuality equals power over men, as well as large revenues for sex-positive performers and those who profit from their public display of sexuality. (Zaslow, 2009, p. 62)

The girls in Zaslow’s study refer to “sex sells” as a justification for women artists to exhibit hypersexuality. They buy into the neoliberal idea that if a woman makes money for herself off her own sexuality, then she is making empowered, feminist choices, without mentioning the effects on women as a whole. This combining of power through sexuality and the “sex sells” imperative leads to an equating of sexuality and sexiness. Regarding this inaccurate but commonly communicated parallel, Zaslow (2009) says, “The message is that sexuality is not a personal experience, not something one cultivates internally, and not something one might seek to honor and celebrate inwardly. Rather, female sexuality becomes conflated with male pleasure, not female pleasure” (p. 59). Equating sexuality (a personal state) with sexiness (a public display determined by normative standards) makes a woman’s sex appeal to others the indication of healthy sexuality, rather than how she feels about her own sexuality.

Increasing Popularity and Commodification of Feminism in the Early 2010s

Throughout the 2010s, alongside the development of our “pornified culture” that Dines (2010) identifies, there was an increase in feminist discourse in popular culture. In her 2016 book, *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler explores what she calls “marketplace feminism,” that is, “a mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt” (p. XIII). She warns that this modern form of mainstream feminism is “decontextualized,” “depoliticized,” and “probably feminism’s most popular iteration ever” (Zeisler, 2016, p. XIII). Zeisler describes how in recent years “feminist” has become a positive label to adopt as celebrities, politicians (including female anti-choice candidates, like Sarah Palin), products, and media publications began to incorporate feminism into their brands—or, more accurately, they mentioned feminism to varying degrees, sometimes supporting this feminist discourse with action toward gender equity, but oftentimes not.

In August 2014 at the MTV Video Music Awards, pop superstar Beyoncé performed a medley of songs from her self-titled video album in front of a lit-up sign reading “FEMINIST.” This performance marked a turning point in mainstream feminism, with a major artist embracing a title with a negative connotation (Zaslow, 2018). A month later, actress Emma Watson, of *Harry Potter* fame, gave a speech to the United Nations launching a campaign called “HeForShe,” which asks men to become advocates for gender equality. In the fall of 2015, pop singer Katy Perry described her perfume as “royal, rebellious, and feminist.”³ Also during the early and mid-2010s, some brands

³ I do argue that a celebrity calling herself a feminist is vastly different than a celebrity calling her perfume feminist because a celebrity is a human being with the power to work toward structural change and a perfume is not.

including Chanel, Verizon, Always, and Pantene seized opportunities to market their companies and products (including nail polish, underwear, and energy drinks) as “feminist,” since the word had shed its former negative connotations and become trendy instead, largely thanks to Beyoncé (Zeisler, 2016, pp. XI-XIV). Zeisler (2016) describes this trend succinctly, saying that recently, “Feminism got cool” (p. X).

This commodification of feminism described by Zeisler (2016) is possible only within the neoliberal third wave belief that feminism is about individual women’s choices rather than collective, counter-hegemonic change. A feminist movement that considers choice to be the ultimate symbol of a woman’s liberation invites a market in which corporations can sell products that a woman can “choose” to buy on her journey to empowerment. As Lamb and Peterson (2012) state, “The term empowerment has been overused and co-opted by marketers who then suggest that empowerment can be achieved through consumerism” (p. 705). Rosalind Gill (2008) argues:

Notions of choice and “pleasing one’s self” are central to the commercial discourse of feminine empowerment, as products are sold to women as tools to reach true confidence and self esteem, which, according to marketplace feminism, must lead to empowerment. (p. 43)

A woman’s individual choice to consume certain products then is considered a feminist act, though it does not actually create structural, feminist change for women; it simply allows the individual woman to feel that she is choosing her way to liberation (Griffith, 2017). In 2003, the satirical news site The Onion wrote an article titled, “Women Now Empowered By Everything a Woman Does,” highlighting the ubiquitous labeling of everyday actions and purchases as empowering, and cleverly demonstrating that the

overuse of this word renders it meaningless (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Initial Embrace of Feminism by Ariana Grande

In recent years, Ariana Grande has called herself a feminist and publicly described the reasons she believes in feminism (Griffith, 2017). In 2016, Grande stated, “We deserve to be equal, everyone deserves to be equal, it’s just—it’s a never ending fight...There’s so much work to do for women still...[Feminism is] not about being above men, it’s about being equal to men” (POPSUGAR Beauty, 2016). In an interview with Power 106 radio station in Los Angeles in the fall of 2015, Grande critiqued the DJs interviewing her when they asked sexist questions. They began with, “If you could use [only] makeup or your phone one last time, which one would you pick?” She responded quickly, “Is this what you think girls have trouble choosing between?” and continued to critique sexist comments made throughout the interview (OfficialGrandeVideos, 2017). In June of 2015, Ariana Grande tweeted a short essay in which she criticized her being referred to as a man’s ex-girlfriend rather than as an individual. She wrote, “Women are mostly referred to as a man’s past, present or future PROPERTY/POSSESSION. I... do not. belong. to. anyone. but myself. and neither do you” (Eidell, 2015). She goes on to mention the “female activists” in her family, reference Gloria Steinem, and critique sexual double standards between men and women (Griffith, 2017). Grande is particularly vocal about the “double standard” for men and women surrounding “showing skin / expressing sexuality” (Fisher, 2016). In May of 2016, she told *Billboard* magazine:

If you’re going to rave about how sexy a male artist looks with his shirt off and a woman decides to get in her panties or show her boobies for a photo shoot, she needs to be treated with the same awe and admiration. I will say it until I’m an

old-ass lady with my tits out at Whole Foods. I'll be in the produce aisle, naked at 95, with a sensible ponytail, one strand of hair left on my head and a Chanel bow.

(Martins, 2016, para. 10)

Much of Grande's rhetoric surrounding feminism and empowerment is related to sexuality—or, more specifically, the public performance of sexuality through clothing (or lack thereof). Regardless of her particular definition of empowerment, Grande has been transparent and insistent about her willingness to speak about feminism and gender equality:

If I'm speaking about something that I'm passionate about, I'm willing to take the brunt for fighting for what I believe in, and my fellow women are definitely something that I will always be one of the first to speak up about. (97.1 AMP Radio, 2016)

Exchanges such as these, in addition to comments she has made about body image and other female celebrities, earned Grande the title of "Feminist Hero" according to E! News in 2016 (Fisher, 2016).

In the fall of 2019, Ariana Grande endorsed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders as a presidential candidate. She shared photos of herself with the candidate, along with a caption that read "MY GUY" (Shaffer, 2019a). Sanders' progressive platform has earned him a 100% rating from NARAL Pro-Choice America and Planned Parenthood Action Fund ("Bernie Sanders on Women's Rights," 2020). For her Sweetener World Tour in 2019, Grande worked with the organization Head Count, which gave audience members the opportunity to register to vote at her concerts. Head Count goes on tour with several artists, and Grande's tour broke their record, with 33,381 voter registrations and actions

at her shows (Delgado, 2019).

Initial Embrace of Feminism by Taylor Swift

In promotional interviews for her 2014 album *1989*, Taylor Swift spoke regularly about her newfound embrace of feminism, stating, “Misogyny is ingrained in people from the time they are born. So to me, feminism is probably the most important movement that you could embrace, because it’s just basically another word for equality” (Roy, 2015).

Years earlier Swift had renounced the label of feminist, but in 2014 she clarified:

When asked early on about feminism in my career—I think I was probably fifteen the first time I was asked about it, and so I would just say, “I don’t talk about politics, I don’t really understand that stuff yet, so I guess I’m just gonna say I’m not.” And I wish that when I was younger I would’ve known that it’s simply hoping for gender equality. (“1989 Interview,” 2014)

Swift has written and co-written all of her albums, and in some of her songs, she includes minute details and first names that sometimes provide listeners with enough information to theorize about whom she wrote the song (Griffith, 2017). Swift spoke in interviews in 2014 about the double standard she experiences as a female writer, citing the criticism she receives for writing autobiographical songs which, she says, does not happen to male songwriters:

If a guy shares his experience in writing, he’s brave, if a woman shares her experience in writing, she’s over-sharing, and she’s over-emotional, or she might be crazy, or [people say], “Watch out, she’ll write a song about you!” ... That joke is so old and it’s coming from a place of such sexism. (ABC News, 2014)

During interviews promoting *1989*, Swift spoke regularly about being a feminist, the sexist double standards she experiences in the music industry, and her decision to stop dating and instead focus on her friendships with women who made her think, “God, I want to be around her” (Eells, 2014).

Sara Banet Weisner (2018) warns that it is overly simplistic to “dismiss popular feminism as just another branding exercise that serves the ever-expanding reach of neoliberal markets, or to try to determine the authenticity of certain feminisms over others” (p. XI). Rather, it is the complexity within each representation of feminism that should compel scholars and consumers of pop culture to continue critically engaging with media messages. That being said, while it would be easy to assume Grande and Swift’s discussions of feminism, sexism, and empowerment are simply marketing tactics rather than principles they truly believe in, I will not succumb to dismissing their words outright. I do not find it difficult to believe that women in the public eye can truly take a feminist stance or have these reactions to growing up in a patriarchal culture.

Identity Markers of Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift

Both Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift are white women who reap the benefits of whiteness in a culture in which racism is normal, inherent, and embedded in society. The ingraining of racism into a society makes it difficult to recognize and cure inequities, therefore allowing racism to serve “both psychic and material” purposes for white people, including Grande and Swift (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). Or, as bell hooks (1984) so aptly put it, these two artists are empowered within and because of the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” in which they live and work (p. 51). Grande and Swift,

however, allow race to influence their personal brands in contrasting ways, as will be discussed in detail in following sections.

Scholars have written at length about how Swift's identity as a white woman is linked to her branding as an artist known for her authenticity, innocence, normativity, and modesty (see Brown, 2012; Isaksen & Eltantawy, 2019; Dubrofsky, 2016). Alternatively, Grande, a white American woman with an Italian family heritage, has very tan skin that some say has gotten increasingly darker as her career has progressed. A quick search of "Ariana Grande Latina" on Twitter brings up countless users expressing shock upon learning that Grande is Italian-American, rather than Latina or Hispanic. Although Grande has spoken openly about her Italian heritage (Dodson, 2018), and she has not overtly claimed to be Latina, it is possible that Grande's racial ambiguity provides her access to the cultures of women of color while still benefitting from her white privilege.

Ariana Grande

Introduction

Ariana Grande began her career performing in local theater productions in her hometown of Boca Raton, Florida. At 14 years old, she was cast in the Broadway musical *13*, and weeks later, she landed a lead role on the Nickelodeon show *Victorious* (2010-2013). She never saw herself as an actress, Grande says, but as a young teenager who wanted to pursue a career in R&B music, she was encouraged to build a following through acting before beginning a music career (Haskell, 2019). In 2011, Grande signed with Republic Records, and she began working primarily on music the following year. Since 2013, she has released five albums, all certified platinum, and been on three world tours. During the promotion of her 2016 album *Dangerous Woman* and her 2018 album *Sweetener*, Grande cemented her public persona as an empowered woman (see Griffith, 2017 for a more detailed analysis of Grande's empowerment on *Dangerous Woman*). Grande's 2019 album, titled, *thank u, next*, exacerbated this element of her career, particularly in light of the tragedies Grande faced—namely, the highly publicized end of her engagement to comedian Pete Davidson, the loss of her friend and ex-boyfriend Mac Miller to a drug overdose, and a shooting outside of her concert in Manchester, England that injured 139 people and killed 23, including an 8-year-old fan (Weiner, 2018).

The twelve tracks on *thank u, next* detail Grande's personal life in the months prior to the album's release and her ability to triumph in spite of the emotional challenges she encountered. It was released only six months after her prior album, *Sweetener*. In an interview with Zach Sang, Grande discussed writing and recording *thank u, next*, saying, "I made [the album] with my best friends over the course of a really small period of time,

and it kind of saved my life...I don't think life has ever been as bad as it was when [we started the album],” cementing the theme of the album for listeners as that of triumph and empowerment after significant emotional challenges (Iasimone, 2019). Without any prior promotion, the album's lead single, “thank u, next” debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 Chart in November of 2018. The song (written by Ariana Grande, Tommy Brown, Michael Foster, Charles Anderson, Tayla Parx, Victoria McCants, Njomza Vitia, and Kimberly Krysiuk) received widespread critical acclaim, with one reviewer describing it as, “a feminist rewriting of the public narrative—about a woman defined by, and perhaps even brought down by, men—pulled off with lightness” (Kornhaber, 2018). The track made way for its eponymous album, making clear to listeners that *thank u, next* would be an album about not only romantic relationships, but also about Grande's love for herself, her friends, her independence (from men), her sexuality, and her success. Together, these themes combine to construct Grande as a woman who, as established on her past albums, is empowered by her public performance of sexuality.

Grande takes advantage of opportunities to brand herself as simultaneously a sex symbol and an empowered woman, and this is a brand she is able to maintain because of postfeminist understandings of the neoliberal sexual subject (Gill, 2016). Although she expresses feminist statements, speaks openly about her belief that men and women deserve equal rights and opportunities, encourages voter registration, and endorses progressive politicians, Grande fails to acknowledge how her individual empowerment as a white woman benefits from existing ideologies of consumerism, beauty, and white supremacy. She seizes branding opportunities often at the expense of working class women and women of color, failing to recognize the intersecting nature of gender, race,

and class in the feminist fight for collective liberation of girls and women. The following section demonstrates how as she empowers herself through her lyrics, music videos, and public statements, Ariana Grande does little to challenge the disempowerment of women (and men) who do not share her privileges.

Sexuality, Consumerism, & Empowerment

Ariana Grande's career is flourishing during what feminist media scholars have dubbed "post-feminism," an iteration of third wave feminism characterized by its neoliberal sensibilities (Gill, 2016, p. 610). The term "post-feminism" is not meant to imply that feminism is no longer necessary; rather, it is a reference to the false consensus that feminism is a lifestyle enacted by individual, empowered women, rather than a political movement to challenge male hegemony. This makes way for a more embedded, and therefore potentially more pernicious, form of sexism that is more difficult to isolate into waves, and easier for misogynists to deny the existence of. Characteristic of post-feminism's neoliberal sensibilities is the valuing of a woman's ability to work hard enough to achieve financial independence from men and institutions (Zaslow, 2009). Rather than accept institutional support as a tool to reach gender equity, thereby giving women the freedom to work toward institutional change when necessary, postfeminism challenges women to adhere to an exploitative capitalist system that burdens them more than it burdens their male counterparts. The lyrics of Ariana Grande's song "7 rings" describe Grande's financial triumph and the emotional triumph that comes as a result of her capital. Throughout the song, Grande lists the material items she is able to obtain with her overwhelming wealth. On the list are fake eyelashes, champagne, diamond rings, lip gloss, hair extensions, designer shoes, a house, and a jet. She describes her ability to buy

herself anything she likes and the happiness this brings her. “I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it,” repeats the chorus, as the music video shows her in a house full of luxury items.

Grande’s equating of wealth and independence with power is in keeping with the characteristics of the postfeminist girl power media culture described by Zaslow (2018). The independent woman of girl power feminism “[declares] her power through conspicuous displays of financial success” (Zaslow, 2018, p. 56). As Pennington (2016) writes, “To be a fully modern and empowered woman one [has] to consume,” because women’s liberation is situated “within the context of consumption” (p. 117). In becoming a fully modern and empowered woman, Grande perpetuates a commodified version of feminism as she sings, “Whoever said money can’t solve your problems must not have had enough money to solve ‘em.” She is a woman who feels empowered by her consumer choices, which support rather than challenge the capitalist systems that promote Ariana Grande but oppress other women structurally. Girl power as a vision of feminism rooted in consumerism fails to provide girls and women with the tools necessary to challenge classist structures and systems, and because of the intersecting nature of class, gender, and race, multiple systems of oppression remain unchallenged by the girl power that Grande exudes (Zaslow, 2009).

Zaslow (2009) examines the disconnect between the rhetoric used by girls coming of age in postfeminism and their lived realities. When asked to name feminist women in media and in their lives, girls consistently describe women who are self-reliant, independent from the support of both family members and institutions. Postfeminist sensibilities have not given the girls interviewed in Zaslow’s (2009) study the tools necessary to question the structural inhibitors that women face, including a lack of

government support for childcare and paid family leave, wage inequities, and the continuation of the “second shift” of house work. Instead, girls are led to use a “neoliberal language of self-reliance,” placing the responsibility of liberation on individual women’s choices (Zaslow, 2009, p. 116). Zaslow (2009) notes how this disconnect in her study subjects reflects a larger cultural disconnect:

Rather, the discrepancy between the discourse of independence and the reality of interdependence is significant because it not only highlights a sense of cultural discordance that may be experienced by the girls in this study, it also reifies a socioeconomic system that continues to make cuts to social welfare as well as a sociopolitical sensibility that views change as arising from individual acts rather than collective struggle. (p. 117)

Thus, when Grande fulfills the role of an independent woman who is empowered by her consumer choices, she is not only perpetuating the mythical ideology that we are post feminism, but she is contributing to a culture in which economic neoliberalism becomes more ingrained, to the particular detriment of working class women who could benefit from structural feminist support.

It is essential to note that Grande’s purchases in the lyrics of “7 rings” are primarily aesthetic choices. She says her “gloss is poppin’,” “smile is beamin’,” and her “skin is gleamin,’” not because of their natural allure, but because she could afford to make these things true. Lyrics like these, combined with the overtly sexualized images of women in the music video, further associate the triumphant, empowered theme of the *thank u, next* album with Grande’s ability to adhere to normative standards of beauty and sexuality. Directed by Hannah Lux Davis, the music video for “7 rings” shows Grande

taking a passive position, existing like an object to be consumed by viewers, and this positioning is accepted without protest because she is believed to have chosen it for her own commercial and cultural gain. She is shown through the male gaze, as defined by Mulvey (1975) and described within music videos by Jhally (2007). She touches herself suggestively, the camera pans up and down her body, her body parts are shown as fragmented pieces, and she writhes in a variety of suggestive poses (Jhally, 2007). The same is true for several other women in the video. Despite the song's theme of independence and success, Grande shows little agency in many of the video's scenes. Alongside these images, she sings, "When you see them racks, they stacked up like my ass."

Grande fits the mold of the neoliberal sexual subject described by Gill (2008). "7 rings" is not a song about sexuality or relationships, but because it is a song about empowerment, the music video hypersexualizes Grande. Sexiness and empowerment go hand in hand in modern feminism because of the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification; neoliberal choice rhetoric allows female performers to adopt hypersexualized personas by "choice" and be considered empowered feminists simply because they made the choice to do so (Gill, 2003). Ariana Grande, as is typical of girl power media culture, perpetuates anti-feminist images of herself that lead to her own empowerment but do nothing to challenge the sexual objectification of other women. As a creator of mass media content, Grande indirectly provides pivotal information about sexual norms, values, and behaviors within a culture (Karsay et. al., 2018). According to objectification theory, as defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), sexual objectification in media leads girls and women to internalize an outsider's gaze of their

own bodies and sexualities, which can lead to shame, anxiety, demotivation, depression, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, and a lack of awareness about internal bodily states. By presenting herself and her costars as sexual objects in her music videos, Grande plays a part in the negative effects of sexual objectification on girls and women, thus furthering the sexism they experience as subordinate members of a patriarchy. Yet, because of the shift of sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, Grande is mostly protected from criticism for this so long as she is believed to be actively choosing to objectify herself (see Griffith, 2017 for more on the objectification in Grande's older lyrics).

Gill (2017) argues that self-surveillance has become a requirement for women in postfeminism. Given their supposed unlimited power to better themselves, to compete in a man's world, and to feel strong and brave, girls and women are expected to apply this mindset to their appearances. This requirement has been amplified further by social media and modern digital culture as a whole. Gill cites the apps used for self-surveillance, including those designed for editing selfies, applying filters, trying out plastic surgery looks, and scanning the body for "flaws" such as sun damage. This postfeminist pressure demands that a woman pull from her "inner core of (girl) power" in order to optimize all aspects of her life (Zaslow, 2009, p. 2). This self-surveillance is extremely gendered, Gill (2017) notes, "facilitating intensive scrutiny and quantification of health indicators, mood, weight, calorie consumption, menstrual cycles, sexual activity and so on" (p. 617). Self-surveillance is an extension of the neoliberal ideology that it is an individual's responsibility to self-govern, self-discipline, self-regulate, and self-enterprise on the journey to success—in this case, success extends to the pursuit of beauty (Griffith, 2017). In "7 rings," Grande encapsulates a particular narrative: spend

money, look better, feel better. Her life is improved by her ability to adhere to normative beauty standards—this is refreshingly honest. But Grande offers no respite to the women who do not have the physical or economic ability to reach the level of success, happiness, and empowerment that she does—and these women are, inarguably, her fan base, the reason she has her wealth. Grande profits off a system that privileges her while disadvantaging her fans.

Perhaps the pinnacle of Grande’s neoliberal, postfeminist positioning comes in the form of her 2018 single, “God is a woman,” written by Grande and four men: Rickard Goransson, Max Martin, Savan Kotecha, and Ilya Salmanzadeh. In the song (from the album *Sweetener*, released just six months before *thank u, next*), Grande sings about how she is so able to sexually satisfy her male partner that he will begin to believe that God is a woman, that she is—literally—divine. The opening lines center Grande’s partner’s sexual pleasure: “You / you love it how I move / you / you love it how I touch you,” but she later takes some agency of her own pleasure: “I’m telling you the way I like it / how I want it.” The music video, directed by Dave Meyers, is littered with semiotic references to both religion and female sexual anatomy. Grande is pictured standing in the middle of the Milky Way, controlling the earth through her touch. In one scene, she is shown pregnant; in another, screaming men throw insults at her, including, “sucks,” “little girl,” “trash,” “stupid,” “fake,” “dumb,” “annoying,” and “hoe.” Wearing a short skirt, thigh-high boots, long, flowing hair, a helmet with animal ears on it, and sleeves with the word “POWER” written on them, Grande proceeds to recite a passage from Ezekiel 25:17, with female pronouns replacing male, referencing a scene from the film *Pulp Fiction*. But

she does not say these words in her own voice; rather, it is pop star Madonna's voice that bellows:

And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my sisters. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you. (Rihanna, 2018)

Grande tosses an oversized gavel toward the glass ceiling above her, shattering it. She is then shown standing between giant legs in high heels, the light from the glass ceiling shining through and covering the disembodied woman's vulva.

"God is a woman" is a clear manifestation of Grande's version of feminism: she is empowered by her ability to attract men, to perform sexually, to please her (male) partner(s), to look a certain way—a hyperfeminine way, as shown by the giant, toned, smooth legs in high heels. She enacts a lifestyle made possible by feminism—a life in which she can make huge profits off of her sexuality without questioning how girls and women with less privilege (because of their social class, adherence to normative beauty standards, gender identity, race, etc.) are not able to do so.

It should be noted that empowerment through sexiness is distinct from empowerment through sexuality. This is a consistent misconception in the rhetoric about sexual empowerment expressed surrounding Grande and by Grande herself. In 2016, in response to someone calling her a "whore" in a Facebook comment on a photo from a music video set, Grande commented:

When will people stop being offended by women showing skin / expressing sexuality? men take their shirts off / express their sexuality on stage, in videos, on instagram, anywhere they want to... all. the. time. the double standard is so boring

and exhausting. with all due respect, i think it's time you get your head out of your ass. ♡ woman [sic] can love their bodies too!! ♡ (Polanco, 2016)

In this exchange, Grande equates “showing skin” with “sexuality,” and therefore equates looking sexy with being sexual. Regarding this inaccurate but commonly communicated parallel, Zaslow (2009) says, “The message is that sexuality is not a personal experience, not something one cultivates internally, and not something one might seek to honor and celebrate inwardly. Rather, female sexuality becomes conflated with male pleasure, not female pleasure” (p. 59). Equating sexuality (a personal state) with sexiness (a public display determined by normative standards) names a woman’s sex appeal to others as the indication of healthy female sexuality, rather than how she feels about her own sexuality. Though Grande’s critique of the gender double standard is valid and worth examining, her belief that providing a display of sexiness to the public is the same as being sexual or a sexually empowered woman is ultimately inaccurate, but consistent with the display of sexuality in her music videos and lyrics. This equating is a tenet of postfeminism (Gill, 2003), hence the commercial acceptance of the “God is a woman” lyrics and music video, which currently (as of March 2020) has more than 267 million views on YouTube.

Accusations of Black & Japanese Cultural Appropriation

Ariana Grande has been accused of appropriating elements of both black and Japanese culture for her own benefit. Much of this criticism has centered around the music video for her song “7 rings,” the second single from *thank u, next*, released about a month before the album, in January 2019. The song was written by Grande, along with her regular cowriters and friends Tayla Parx, Victoria Monét, Njomza Vitia, and Kimberly Krysiuk; producers Tommy Brown, Charles Anderson, and Michael Foster are

also credited as writers on the track.⁴ Grande says she began writing the song with her friends during an emotional day in New York City. Her friends brought her to a Tiffany's store, where they drank "too much champagne," and she bought each of them a diamond ring—hence the title of the track. Traveling back to the recording studio that afternoon, Vitia suggested they write a song about the experience (Emmanuele, 2018). On the track, Grande sings, "Wearing a ring but ain't gon' be no Mrs. / bought matching diamonds for six of my bitches / I'd rather spoil all my friends with my riches." The tale of female solidarity and support between Grande and her friends is fitting with the theme of *thank u, next* as a whole, but the song and music video's cultural symbols and rhetoric surrounding wealth and power complicate this message.

In a comprehensive *Atlantic* article, titled, "How Ariana Grande Fell Off the Cultural-Appropriation Tightrope," Spencer Kornhaber (2019) analyzes similarities between the lyrics of "7 rings" and lyrics to songs by artists of color who are not credited on Grande's song. In 2011, black hip-hop artist 2 Chainz released a song called "Spend It," in which he sings, "It's mine / I spent it," over a melody extremely similar to Grande's when she sings the lines, "I want it / I got it," in "7 rings." The similarities between Grande's lyrics and those of 2 Chainz are significant not only because of the possibility of plagiarism, but because they constitute an appropriation of black culture. Kornhaber (2019) describes 2 Chainz's song "Spend It" as "a victory lap for someone who's had to deal drugs since he was a teenager." When 2 Chainz sings about finally being financially secure, he does so having escaped a situation that was directly

⁴ Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II, composers of *The Sound of Music*, are also credited on the track, because Grande sampled the melody of "My Favorite Things" with original lyrics in the first verse of "7 rings."

influenced by his race and social class. Grande, a white woman who began a successful career in entertainment as a child, has not experienced the same struggle as 2 Chainz. For Grande to draw a parallel between the two is to dismiss the struggle of the black artist whom she is nearly quoting. Grande, then, is recruiting material resources from people of color and using them at the top of the racial hierarchy as a white woman, like Hill (2008) described as one of the “projects of white racist culture” (p. 158). Grande not only avoids “the oppression of systemic racism in the U.S.,” but she actively “benefits from its strictures and structures” by capitalizing on 2 Chainz’s prior work expressing his own narrative as a black man (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015, p. 321).⁵

It is not uncommon for figures in mass media, particularly white pop stars, to appropriate the cultures of people of color. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) discuss how white performers maintain their white privilege even when they dabble in black culture. White performers can use black cultural forms, such as African American English, while simultaneously reinforcing white standards of beauty and respectability (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). This leads to capital gains for white artists that surpass those of black artists who were actually raised within black culture; white artists still benefit from white privilege because of the color of their skin, and simply choose to adopt elements of black culture when convenient in order to advance their careers or creative visions. White artists (and all white people) can therefore ignore the struggle that characterizes black

⁵ 2 Chainz and Grande have since recorded a song together, “Rule The World,” for 2 Chainz’s new album, *Rap Or Go To League*. Upon meeting Grande, 2 Chainz says, “She was more or less saying that, ‘Well, yeah, I thought people knew I took it from you.’ And I said, ‘Well, how would people know that? You know what I’m saying?’ It was just one of those things where I didn’t even know you were a fan of mine, and we built a rapport.” They released a remix of “7 rings” together in February 2019 (McKinney, 2019).

culture and benefit from the oppression of black people. As Smitherman (2006) writes, “Whites get [Black Style] at bargain-basement prices, don’t have to pay no dues, but they reap the psychological, social—and economic—benefits of a culture forged in enslavement, neo-enslavement, Jim Crow, apartheid, and continuing hard times” (p. 110).

Tayla Parx, who co-wrote “7 rings” with Grande and the rest, played a large role in the creation of *thank u, next*, with songwriting credits on half of the album’s tracks. Parx is a singer, songwriter, and producer who has written songs for dozens of artists, including Jennifer Lopez, Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, Demi Lovato, BTS, Janelle Monáe, and Panic! at the Disco. “I really had to jump through all the hoops of fire,” she told the New York Times in 2019, describing the challenges she’s faced thus far in her career, “First of all, being black, and then being a woman, and then being a young black woman. But we got through all of them” (Coscarelli, 2019). As for the accusations of cultural appropriation made about her work with Grande, Parx said, “[Ariana’s] allowed to fuse everything. I think it’s important. It’s important to fuse all of these things to really bring us together, so we can look left and right at these award shows and see different kinds of artists” (Lockett, 2019). Grande does more to challenge racism than other, black artists, Parx claims. “She’s actually supporting the black producers and writers that she works with more than some of the black artists that I’ve worked with,” she told the New York Times (Coscarelli, 2019). Although having a young black woman artist give Grande her stamp of approval does not clear her of the accusations, it is a potentially important part of the narrative of “7 rings” and how fans interpret the song.⁶ The song is about Grande

⁶ Similarly, artist Patti LaBelle has given Grande her stamp of approval, encouraging Grande with, “Go up there and sing like that white black woman you are,” and insisting, “Ariana can sing me under the table—and listen, I can sing” (Haskell, 2019).

treating her girlfriends to diamond rings, the way women are traditionally expected to be treated by their male partners. Grande challenges this traditionally gendered narrative and has expressed this to her fans in her discussion of the story behind the song. As a writer on the song as well as a character in the song's story, Tayla Parx's interpretation of Grande's work and racial stances can potentially influence whether or not audiences find the cultural appropriation offensive. "For me to connect to a young female is a completely different perspective than when you have a Max Martin talking to a young female," Parx says, referring to the long-time Swedish hitmaker who has been both criticized and acclaimed for writing and/or producing a massive number of radio hits in the last two decades (Coscarelli, 2019; Rich, 2015). Writing "7 rings" with her young women of color friends does not clear Grande of the accusations, but it does complicate them, particularly because Parx positions herself as an agent in Grande's career, talking openly about their creative partnership.

In 2017, a Puerto Rican artist named Princess Nokia released a song called "Mine," about the hairpieces that black and Latina women buy and wear. In the chorus of the song, Princess Nokia sings, "It's mine / I bought it," about her hairpiece. In "7 rings," Grande sings, "You like my hair? / Gee thanks, just bought it." Grande's lyrics refer to the hair extensions that make up her signature high ponytail, a long-time part of her image that is widely accepted and emulated. Alternately, Princess Nokia's lyrics refer to the weaves and hairpieces that black and Latina women are often ridiculed for wearing because of white standards of beauty and respectability, which require a woman's natural hair to be smooth and straight to a degree that is not feasible for many black and Latina women. For Grande to reference her own extensions the same way Princess Nokia

references hers is to erase the bifurcated public perceptions of these two women's hairstyles, which are entirely influenced by race and racism. While Princess Nokia's mentioning of her purchased hair is counter-hegemonic because it challenges white standards of beauty, Grande's lyrics perpetuate these same standards, which benefits her as a white woman and does not address the oppression of women of color. As Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) write, "Whiteness is an invisible racial category, setting societal norms," (p. 306), thus a white pop star who appropriates non-white cultures is "met with material rewards of blackness far beyond what African Americans reap, and at the same time, reinforces standards of beauty, desirability, and acceptability—all linked to whiteness—already affirmed in popular culture" (p. 321).⁷ Although Princess Nokia is Puerto Rican and not black, the same analysis can be applied, as Grande is still reaping the benefits of white privilege as she appropriates the cultures of non-dominant groups.

Princess Nokia herself has been accused of taking credit for other artists' work as well. She was accused of copying the melody of her song "Mine" from A\$AP Rocky's song "Praise Da Lord" (2018). In turn, "Praise Da Lord" has a melody that has been compared to "Spend It" (2011) by 2 Chainz, which has been linked back to "Pretty Boy Swag" (2010) by Soulja Boy (Donohue, 2019). Donohue (2019) writes:

There is no denying that it is all but industry standard for mainstream artists to copy everything from auditory stylings to aesthetic inspiration from underground

⁷ At the time of this writing, Grande has not addressed Princess Nokia's accusation. Black hip-hop artist Soulja Boy has also accused Grande of "stealing" a melody of his ("Pretty Boy Swag") (Espinoza, 2019). "rings" also references The Notorious B.I.G.'s song "Gimme the Loot" (Kornhaber, 2019). Grande's hip-hop and trap music stylings in the song have been criticized in and of themselves by some who believe them to be further evidence of her appropriating black culture (Blackmon, 2019).

creatives—and that the crime becomes all the more heinous when it entails white artists stealing from artists of color. But Nokia’s complex role as both artistic source material and sampler herself does underline the fact that in today’s music industry, there is very little that is new under the sonic sun.

Donohue’s analysis addresses the nuance behind a crucial question of appropriation versus inspiration. It is true that imitating melodies is common in the music industry, whether it is done as an homage, as plagiarism, or unknowingly. It is also true that when a white woman (or man) artist uses a hip-hop melody without properly supporting the black community, she reaps white privileges without advocating for the people of color to whom she owes her success, at least in part. Race complicates the accusations of borrowing (or stealing), but the reproduction of melodies and/or lyrics does not only happen across races; it happens within communities, races, and genres as well.

The lyrics of “7 rings” include a bombastic list of products Grande is now wealthy enough to purchase for herself, thus she sings, “Who ever said money can’t solve your problems / must not have had enough money to solve them.” Shadijanova (2019) says the issue with “7 rings” does not lie in its melody, but in its lyricism and imagery—and the stark contrast between the two. In the song’s music video, Grande and her friends are shown partying in- and outside “a traditionally ‘hood’ setting such as a trap house” with graffiti symbols dispersed across the setting (Shadijanova, 2019). In doing so, Grande positions herself as a wealthy white woman whose power exists not only in contrast to but because of what Dabiri (2018) calls “the gift that keeps on giving,” that is, “unacknowledged physical, cultural or material black labour.” This black labour “aids in the construction of western culture,” as white privilege cannot exist without the othering

and/or subordination of other races (Dabiri, 2018). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) relates this hierarchical positioning of races to standards of beauty for women. “Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions,” Collins (2000) writes, “blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair” (pp. 89-90). Black and Latina women who wear hairpieces are discriminated against for not adhering to normative white standards of beauty. As a white woman with extensions who sings about buying her hair like women of color do, Ariana Grande does not experience racist discrimination, but rather benefits from it by positioning herself in contrast to women of color.

Cultural appropriation, particularly in music, goes beyond the black-white binary. In her analysis of pop star Katy Perry’s music video for the song “Dark Horse,” Rosemary Pennington (2016) critiques the artist’s attainment of power through the othering of Asian men. As Perry is shown in her music video as a woman with the power to literally disintegrate men of color as they approach her, she reinforces the assertion of whiteness as power and privilege in a racist system. The men of color in the music video, who serve as Perry’s suitors, exist “to create a kind of exotic multi-culturalism in which race and ethnicity are deployed strategically to create a sense of sexual empowerment as [Western] women are portrayed as liberal subjects, free to be whomever they long to be” (Pennington, 2016, p. 115). Perry defines herself in relation to the men of color over whom she has power; her gender and racial identities intersect in this music video as she expresses her identity as:

a liberated Western woman; a pop icon who can devour what she wants when she wants; a beautiful female who can allow herself to be momentarily objectified because, in the end, she holds all the power in her interactions with the men [of color] she encounters. (Pennington, 2016, p. 122)

Pennington's analysis of Katy Perry's "orientalism" can be applied to other white pop star's obtaining of power through the appropriation of non-white cultures as well (p. 111).

The music video for "7 rings" uses Japanese characters in several scenes throughout, including a translation of the song's title. Grande is also shown eating a sushi roll while lying on a kitchen table. None of the references to Japanese culture are related to the song's lyrics or to the narrative of the music video; she uses them for purely aesthetic purposes to boost her own success. Like Pennington (2016) wrote of Katy Perry, Grande uses Asian cultures to cement her own identity as a white woman. The "7 rings" music video has a "kawaii aesthetic"; according to Shadijanova (2019), kawaii is defined as a "Japanese artistic and cultural style that emphasises the quality of cuteness, using bright colours and characters with a childlike appearance." Japanese letters appear several times in the music video, including under the title of the song, on the front license plate on the front of a car, and on the labels of champagne bottles. Grande wears bunny ears on her head throughout much of the video, reminiscent of a traditional fashion trend in Tokyo (Sidell, 2019). Eventually, the bunny ears are replaced with an oversized bow, reinforcing the cute and childlike essence of kawaii. A pink haze filters over the entire video, which simultaneously leans into kawaii aesthetic and the gendered nature of the song's lyrics. Other small markers of kawaii are scattered throughout the video, including

white bunny toys and delicate heart-shaped lights. Grande's use of Japanese symbols invokes a discussion of appropriation versus appreciation. Is Grande partaking in Orientalism, defined by Said (1979) as, "Viewing different cultures through an us-they divide that essentializes and exoticizes them as 'other'—a mere alterity of the self"? Is it true that, as Shadijanova (2019) argues, Grande "repeatedly uses Asian cultures as an exotic aesthetic, then when people call her out for it, she acts all cute and innocent to avoid any accountability"? Shadijanova's argument is based not only on the "7 rings" video, but also on the tabloid story that hit when Grande's fans pointed out on Twitter that the Japanese characters she had tattooed on her hand did not translate to "7 rings," as she intended, but rather, to "small charcoal grill" (the characters, separately, translate to "seven" and "rings," but together take on a different meaning) (Truong, 2019). In response to the incident, Grande said:

I also went back and got it fixed with the help of my tutor to be more accurate. I can't read or write kanji obviously. What do you want me to do? It was done out of love and appreciation. What do you want me to say? (Shadijanova, 2019)

In this statement, Grande takes a victim stance, positioning herself as helpless in matters of race, culture, and appropriation, rather than acting as the agentic, empowered (white) woman she presents elsewhere.

It is entirely probable that Grande does love and appreciate Japanese culture—she has reportedly been studying Japanese since 2015, when "she realized she wanted to be able to communicate with her Japanese fans in Japanese," and because she "really likes Japanese culture," according to her Japanese tutor, Ayumi Furiya (Arnold, 2019). Furiya also came to Grande's defense after the tattoo debacle, saying she was "so mad people

were making fun of” Grande, because her learning Japanese “makes her Japanese fans so happy” and Furiya does not “want [the tattoo story] to stop anyone from being motivated to learn another language” (Arnold, 2019). But her cultural appreciation does not erase her cultural appropriation; Grande participates in both simultaneously. Rosalind Chou (2012) argues that historically, Asian women have been constructed in American media as “whores” with exotic, uncontrollable sexualities (p. 16). The hypersexualization of Asian women in American media—just like that of black and Latina women—is beneficial to Grande’s brand as a sexual being who is empowered by her ability to attract men. Further, Chou (2012) writes, “Controlling sexuality and creating controlling images of Asians in the United States reifies white supremacy, and these images become embedded into the white racial frame” (p. 16). While I argue that Grande is not actively reifying white supremacy, she does gain commercial success from her position as a white woman within it, and she does not actively challenge the othering of Asians and Asian Americans.

Sexuality & Racial Ambiguity

Ariana Grande has been accused of blackfishing, which Shadijanova (2019) describes as, “an act commonly perpetrated by white women to appear of African or Arab ancestry.” Shadijanova (2019) notes that some consider blackfishing to be the modern equivalent of wearing blackface or brownface because it “capitalizes off the ‘exotic’ looks of historically oppressed minorities.” The first, most fundamental argument surrounding Grande’s potential blackfishing is her skin tone. Though she is a white woman, her skin is extremely tan, bronzed far darker than the average white woman, even in makeup. Some have pointed out that her skin has darkened significantly since the

very beginning of her career, when she was an actress on Nickelodeon from 2010 to 2014 (Shadijanova, 2019). Grande's skin tone has been inconsistent over time as well as at different moments in her more recent career. She appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in the summer of 2018 and was pictured with much lighter skin than her other appearances, and with light brown freckles on her face. This shift in skin tones allows Grande to adopt the identity of a woman of color when it is beneficial to her career, then retain her white privilege in other moments.

Emma Dabiri (2018) describes the type of appropriation in which Grande participates in her discussion of white women on Instagram who use make up, hairstyles, extreme tanning, and photo editing to share photos of themselves looking less white and more racially ambiguous. She writes:

Blackness isn't opt in and opt out. We can't be black when it suits us, and then wash it off when confronted by the very real racism that continues to reduce our realities. But it's also crucial to remember that to be black is about more than just skin colour, hair texture or experiences of racism, it is also to be heir to a rich cultural legacy that western culture seems particularly enamoured by, which is somewhat perverse when you consider attitudes to black *people*. (Dabiri, 2018, emphasis original)

The "opt in and opt out" experience Dabiri (2018) references is precisely the privilege Ariana Grande enacts when she darkens her skin to perform at an award show then lightens it for the cover of *Vogue*. Additional elements of being a black woman in a racist culture, as Dabiri (2018) describes, are the "assumptions about [a black woman's] sexual availability and perceived licentiousness." Grande is able to reap the benefits of these

assumptions and avoid the racist disadvantages by strategically opting in and out of a darker skin tone. With her hypersexualized persona and the empowerment she gains from it, it is in Grande's best interest to maintain a racially ambiguous appearance; to be seen as sexually available and licentious buttresses Grande's highly profitable hypersexualized persona.

Guzmán and Valdivia's (2004) discussion of Latina sexuality in film further complicates the black-white binary oft perpetuated in American popular culture. First, Guzmán and Valdivia write, gender plays an integral role in their examination of Latinidad in media. A discussion of Latino sexuality would tell a different story because women continue to "function as a sign, a stand-in for objects and concepts ranging from nation to beauty to sexuality" (p. 206). Latina women specifically are used to express sexual availability, proficiency, and desirability. The authors write, "Latina booties [are represented] as large, aberrant yet sexy, desirable, and consumable" (p. 218). Latina sexuality fills a space in the racial dichotomy between white and black Americans. While black women's bodies are presented as symbols of excess, therefore falling outside the range of acceptable female sexuality, Latina bodies experience a "hybridity": they are deemed abnormal because they exist in contrast to white women's normative bodies, but are still socially accepted and even praised because they are fetishized rather than disdained like black women's bodies are (p. 218). The othering of Latina bodies (compared to white bodies) is what allows them to be fetishized. Latina women inhabit bodies of contradiction: they are desired yet othered, accepted yet considered abnormal, deemed sexually attractive yet objectified.

Guzmán and Valdivia (2004) argue that actresses who have certain elements of a Latina identity but lack other elements can benefit in precise ways. Specifically, the authors note that actress Jennifer Lopez, because she is a native English speaker with an American accent, has “access to a range of cinematic texts that would normally be slated for Anglo actresses” (p. 215). This further complicates the ambiguity of racial privilege. In a (girl power) media culture that values and validates the hypersexuality of a woman as a tool to harbor her economic and sexual empowerment, there are potential benefits of a pop star dabbling in a Latina identity when it is convenient for her to do so. Ariana Grande, a white American woman often mistaken for Latina, harnesses her personal empowerment and brand of feminism through her hypersexualized public persona. In perpetuating a racially ambiguous identity, Grande, a white woman, can benefit from the sexual fetishization of Latina women without experiencing the structural racism that Latina women experience. “It’s no coincidence that when these online imposters post as their light-skin black alter egos they post thirst-traps with sultry eyes and pouty mouths,” Dabiri (2018) writes, critiquing white women who use racial ambiguity on Instagram, “yet in photographs as their white selves, they remain smilingly wholesome girls next door.” Whiteness, along with all its other privileges, allows women to be perceived as modest and innocent, while women of color are treated as inherently sexually promiscuous. By maintaining her racial ambiguity, Ariana Grande receives the best of both worlds: the privileges of a white woman with the sex appeal of a woman of color.

It should be noted, though, that Grande does not personally claim to be black or Latina. She has spoken openly about her Italian heritage, even clarifying in an interview that her grandfather pronounced “Grande” like “Grandy” to assimilate into American

culture when he immigrated here. “My name is Ariana Grande-Butera,” she says in an exaggerated Italian accent during an interview in 2018. “Like, I’m a pizza... a meatball. I’m parmesan” (Dodson, 2018). She speaks openly about how her career has been influenced and supported by her Italian grandmother, her Nonna (Mcgrath, 2018), and says she wishes she pronounced her last name like her grandfather did, to honor his memory (Dodson, 2018).

Conclusion: thank u, others

In her first number 1 single, “thank u, next,” Ariana Grande says she is grateful for the lessons (“love,” “patience,” and “pain”) she was taught by her ex-boyfriends. “Now I’m so amazing,” she sings, having experienced her relationships with the four men she names in the first verse of the song, as well as the end of those relationships. Yet there are many more whom Grande could thank for her wealth, appearance, and success. Namely, as described in this section, Grande dabbles in black and Latinx culture when it is convenient for her to do so, borrowing images such as a trap house and hair pieces for grandiose music videos and catchy lyrics, then lightens her infamously-bronzed skin tone when she appears on the cover of *Vogue*. She celebrates her wealth and the power it brings her without questioning the systems that allow her to profit or thanking her fans for directly and indirectly providing her wealth while more than 38 million people in the United States live in poverty (“US Census,” 2019). Most of all, Grande acquires her empowerment through her hypersexualized persona. In adhering to normative standards of beauty and sexuality and by objectifying herself in her music videos, she does nothing to challenge the normativity that other girls and women cannot meet. Grande also picks and chooses pieces of Japanese culture, allowing her to capitalize on the

hypersexualization and exoticization of Asian female bodies without experiencing structural racism (Chou, 2012).

In discussions of sexism, racism, and classism, there is often—rightfully so—consideration of the perpetrator’s intentions, and whether or not this person is acting from a place of hatred. I do not intend to argue that Ariana Grande does not care about inequities in gender, race, and class; on the contrary, I believe her politics have proven her intentions to be righteous. But she is a product of girl power media culture—and when I use the word product, I do not do so only to express lofty cynicism about her artwork and career as mere branding exercises. Rather, Grande is a woman who was raised within girl power media culture, who came of age and found success within a neoliberal system that rewards those with the proper privileges to adhere to the system, like Grande herself does. The neoliberal sensibilities of postfeminism and girl power media culture were established several years before Grande began her career in music; her public persona is a perfect fit for a new iteration of the ideal subject of this culture. Grande herself grew up consuming this culture and seeing the success it brought to individual women performers—it was the mainstream definition of feminism long before the “God is a woman” music video reached 250 million views. Grande constructs herself as a neoliberal sexual subject who feels empowered by her appearance and her consumerism (and particularly the consumption that enhances her appearance), who picks and chooses when she wants to darken her skin tone, and who embraces the eroticization that comes with Asian and Latina cultures without experiencing the subjugation that comes with holding a marginalized identity. By harnessing all of these sources of power

without acknowledging them, Ariana Grande becomes the ultimate empowered woman, regardless of the experiences of the women fans who allow her to do so.

Taylor Swift

Introduction

In 2004, Sony/ATV Publishing signed their youngest songwriter to date, 15-year-old Taylor Swift (“Publishing Deal,” 2005). One year later, Swift was offered a record deal by Scott Borchetta, a former employee of Universal Records, who was seeking the first artist for his not-yet-established record company called Big Machine (Kotb, 2009). Swift went on to release her self-titled debut album in 2006, when she was 16 years old and signed to Big Machine. From the release of her very first single, titled “Tim McGraw,” Swift has identified as a songwriter first and foremost, describing minute details about her creative process:

I was in freshman year, and I came up with this song idea in math class. I was just sitting there and started singing to myself, “When you think Tim McGraw, I hope you think my favorite song...” I was dating this guy who was about to go off to college, and I knew we were gonna break up, so I started thinking about all the things that I knew were gonna remind him of me. Being a music nut, the first thing that came to my mind was that my favorite song was a Tim McGraw song. (Neal, 2006)

In his review of “Tim McGraw,” a song about being reminded of a lover by a melody, Jeff Tamarkin (2006) wrote, “It’s a device that’s been used countless times in as many ways, that of associating a failed affair with items, places, and people, yet it works as a hook here and manages to come off as an original idea.” This review’s recognition of Swift’s ability to craft lyrics that were poignant, original, and effective may as well have set the stage for the rest of her branding. Swift began her career as a country artist who

was recognized from the beginning for her talent as a songwriter, so much so that after writing and co-writing her first two albums, she wrote her third, *Speak Now*, entirely on her own at age 19—just to clear any skepticism about whether or not she, as a teenage girl, was “really” writing her own songs.

Listeners consistently cite Swift’s autobiographical songwriting style as the reason they are fans of not only her music, but of Swift as an individual. Early in Swift’s career, many teenage girls cited the “intensely personal nature” of Swift’s songs as a reason to keep listening; they could relate to the artist’s (painful) experiences with “the highs/lows of school, friendships and relationships” and “not fitting in,” and they viewed Swift as not only a celebrity, but as a peer who understood them (Chittendon, 2013, pp. 186-187). Swift’s persona as an everygirl was rooted in her personal songwriting as well as her adherence to traditional femininity: she was polite, poised, pretty, and politically passive in the first half of her career. Her ability to be commended as wholesome and a “good girl” role model, Brown (2012) argues, was rooted in her whiteness and the privileges accompanying her race.

Swift’s race is one of a long list of privileged identities she maintains, along with her wealth, heterosexuality, and being normatively attractive. These identities allowed Swift to stay silent on matters of politics and social justice up until the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, during which time, criticism replaced the commendation that Swift previously received for her silence. Beginning in the year 2018, Swift shifted her directive, and began endorsing Democratic politicians and supporting socially liberal causes in her music, public statements, and other elements of her star texts. Swift has

specifically commented on feminist issues in recent years, citing her own sexual assault trial as the impetus for her change of tune (Wilson, 2020).

Swift's role as a songwriter first and foremost remains intact as she treads new ground as an artist who expresses her political and social values in her work. Swift's most recent album, *Lover* (2019), and its accompanying music videos and promotional materials demonstrate Swift's politics more than her past work, but she maintains her position as the autobiographical subject of the album. In doing so, an obstacle is created: if a songwriter known for her introspective work looks away from her own privileged experiences to highlight the experiences of marginalized groups, she will lose the core element of her career; yet if she begins to dabble in political messaging without looking beyond her own experiences of gender, race, and social class, she risks writing and releasing music without effective and comprehensive progressive messages. The following section demonstrates Swift's struggle to walk this line as a privileged person who was asked by the public to make (liberal) political statements but still maintain her status as an autobiographical songwriter.

White American Girlhood as a Brand

Adriane Brown (2012) analyzes the initial years (2006-2011) of Taylor Swift's career (when she was primarily considered a country artist rather than a pop star, when her music incorporated much more banjo and much less dubstep), during which the pop star's fans were drawn to her because they believed both Swift and her music to be "authentic," "normal," and "real" (pp. 161-162, 166). Swift's public persona reinforced these interpretations through both her songwriting and marketing. During these early years, Swift's website included an online journal written by the star herself, in addition to

vlogs and other social media posts about her everyday life. Brown (2012) found that girls interpreted Swift's experience of girlhood as universally "relatable" to all girls, thus classifying Swift's privileged experiences as a white and wealthy teenage girl as normative. Swift has written or cowritten every track on her (now seven) full-length albums, often in great detail about her personal life; this confessional-style songwriting further allows her fans to believe that they truly know and can trust Swift's authenticity and universality. Because she writes about her own life, young fans believe that Swift's alignment with "regular" girls is purely natural, rather than crafted with a capital imperative by the artist, her managers, her producers, and her record company.

Although many singers appear as one of a long list of songwriters credited on a track, allowing them to receive a portion of royalties regardless of how large of a role they played in the writing of the song, Swift has proven herself to be the primary songwriter on her albums. At 14 years old, Swift became the youngest person to be hired as a songwriter by Sony/ATV publishing, prompting her family to move to Nashville from Pennsylvania (Willman, 2020). Swift told Billboard in 2014:

When I'm in a room with a writer for the first time, and I bring in 10 to 15 nearly finished songs as my ideas, I think they know that I'm not expecting anyone to do the work for me. I'm not going to be one of those artists who walks in and says, "I don't know, what do you want to write about?" or one of those things where they say, "So, what's going on in your life?" and I tell them and then they have to write a song about it. I wouldn't be a singer if I weren't a songwriter. I have no interest in singing someone else's words. (Light, 2014)

After writing and cowriting her first two albums, Swift grew tired of people assuming that she was not actually writing her lyrics herself, so she wrote her 14-track third album, *Speak Now* (2010), entirely on her own. The belief that an artist wrote a song because of a desire for genuine emotional expression rather than profit makes fans feel more attached to not only the song, but the singer-songwriter responsible for it—in this case, to Taylor Swift herself, the girl behind the albums who “gets” what “girls are going through” (Brown, 2012, p. 166). Writing one’s own songs is typically evaluated positively by both fans and music critics and cited as evidence of honesty and sincerity by teen girls as often as adult men. (Brown, 2012, p. 165).

Scholars have argued that Swift’s early public persona idealizes traditional values of girlhood, including passivity, romance, and innocence, and that in embracing Swift’s persona, fans are fulfilling a longing they feel for an earlier era of female sexuality (see Brown, 2012 and Cullen, 2016). She was seen as a sweet, good, all-American girl whose (sexual) innocence is something that must be protected (Pollock, 2014, p. 210). Swift’s ability to fulfill this righteous role is contingent on her race. Standing nearly 6 feet tall with blonde hair, blue eyes, and alabaster skin, Swift adheres to normative standards of appearance for white women. By dressing and performing modestly, writing songs about heterosexual romance but not sex, and wearing traditionally feminine clothing, Swift was overwhelmingly seen as wholesome in her early career. This conception was a beneficial element of her personal brand, and she was able to harness and lean into this conception because of her white privilege. This was particularly possible for Swift because she writes her own songs about her much-admired and commended lifestyle. Of course, Swift’s image and discography is inevitably influenced by her capitalist motives. Her

early image was marketable because of her race; wholesomeness, authenticity, and innocence are markers of white femininity in particular (Dubrofsky, 2016). When girls (and other fans) consider Swift to be an extremely authentic and realistic role model, they are, inadvertently or not, praising characteristics that are more achievable for white women than women of color.⁸ In turn, while this commendation of traditional white femininity by fans and the embrace of traditional white femininity by Swift may not actively oppress other versions of femininity, they do position these characteristics as acceptable, respectable, and normative compared to the femininity expressed by women who are not white, wealthy, straight, and modest.

Interestingly, in her discussion of Swift's performance of innocence and normativity, Pollock (2014) argues, "[by] performing the type of normativity and femininity that is deemed 'appropriate' or ideal" for young (white) girls, Swift challenges expectations in a music industry that expects women to adhere to the "sex sells" and "good girl gone bad" imperative (p. 49). Pollock contends that in some ways, Swift is counter-hegemonic and is enacting one particular—and legitimate—form of feminism. This relates to a particular quote taken from Brown's (2012) collection of statements from Swift's fan forums, which is also the title of her article: "[Taylor Swift] isn't whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see" (p. 161). Brown's article is premised on the argument that young girl fans of Taylor Swift in 2012 believed Swift's experiences to be universal, and thus believed middle class, heterosexual, traditional, white girlhood to be universal, perpetuating the normativity of hooks' (1984) "white supremacist

⁸ Other scholars have written about the racial dynamics of Swift being seen as a victim of Kanye West after their notorious interaction at the 2009 Video Music Awards. See Cullen (2016) for a more detailed analysis.

capitalist patriarchy” (p. 51). Despite the lack of critical consciousness among the young girls from whom Brown collected data, there is validity to the quote she pulled from a fan and from the argument Pollock (2014) made about Swift’s counter-hegemony. If young girl fans are making such drastic statements—that they are drawn to Swift particularly because of her modest sexuality, her innocence, her femininity, all the things she is able to include as part of her image because of her whiteness—then their longing for Swift’s traditional girlhood likely stems from a lack of fulfilling representation elsewhere in media.

Dines (2010) argues the increase in accessibility of internet pornography has led to increasingly hypersexualized images elsewhere in media. Pop stars have been “pornified,” and pornified images are believed to lead to personal empowerment. Swift provided an alternative to this trend, fulfilling a desire young girls may have had for an alternate version of sexuality that is focused on romance and romantic feelings rather than sex and sexuality. She is an antidote to what Ariel Levy (2006) dubbed “raunch culture” the year that Swift’s debut album was released. In raunch culture, Levy argues:

Women had come so far, I learned, we no longer needed to worry about objectification or misogyny. Instead, it was time for us to join the frat party of pop culture, where men had been enjoying themselves all along. If Male Chauvinist Pigs were men who regarded women as pieces of meat, we would out do them and be Female Chauvinist Pigs: women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves. (Levy, 2006, pp. 2-3)

Thus, Swift’s modest sexuality fills a void in a market saturated with female sexual objectification. But this claim of capitalism is complicated by the fact that Swift did not

begin officially releasing pop music until 2014. In the first half of her career, she was grounded in country music, a genre that has always expected female sexuality to be passive, modest, and innocent (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011).⁹ Swift found mainstream (pop) success in 2008, with the release of her second (country) album, *Fearless*, because of her ability to relate to massive mainstream audiences through her songwriting and her public persona. It is possible that young girl fans do not consider Swift's songwriting and personality to be publicly relatable because they are incapable of seeing beyond the massive media image of *Taylor Swift The Superstar*, but precisely because they *have* looked beyond it and have not recognized themselves elsewhere—Swift fails to perform as Gill's (2003) neoliberal sexual subject, and in doing so, she marks herself as different from many of her contemporaries (namely, Ariana Grande). Though Swift's early songs were written, produced, and released with the goal of maintaining an extremely lucrative brand of authentic white girlhood that has been intentionally crafted, the quest to determine who and what constitutes authenticity and truth is perpetual and indefinable, thus it would be dismissive to overstate the financial motives behind Swift's songwriting and public persona.

She “doesn't make people feel uncomfortable with her views”:

Breaking the “Good Girl” Brand Through Political Statements

Though innocence, modesty, and passivity characterized the early years (2006-2012) of Taylor Swift's career, the singer-songwriter began to strip herself of her “good

⁹ I do not intend to argue that country music presents a more progressive version of female sexuality than other genres. Andsager and Roe (1999) found that country music casts women in subordinate roles; in a study of 203 country music videos featuring male performers, only 9% cast women as fully equal to men.

girl” image after the election of Donald Trump. For Swift, speaking publicly about the progressive values in which she believes is a key part of this image shedding, rather than a stereotypical shift to hypersexuality that appeals to the “good girl gone bad” cliché (Pollock, 2014). Swift of course was aware of her reputation as a “nice girl,” and in 2020, she elaborated on what being a “nice girl” constituted for her, stating, “A nice girl doesn’t force [her] opinions on people. A nice girl smiles and waves and says thank you. A nice girl doesn’t make people feel uncomfortable with her views” (Wilson, 2020). When Swift was in her late twenties, beginning in 2018, she started to speak publicly about her support for liberal politicians and policies.

Swift originally found success as a country artist, but she transitioned fully into the pop music world in 2014, with the release of her fifth album, *1989*. Griffiths (2015) has argued that after 9/11, it became clear that mainstream pop music was generally associated with liberal political stances, whereas country music, as a genre, tended to align with conservative values. As a country artist, Swift says she had been taught not to share her political beliefs. “Part of the fabric of being a country artist is, ‘Don’t force your politics on people; let people live their lives,’” Swift explains in her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana*, directed by Lana Wilson. “That is grilled into [country artists]” (Wilson, 2020). The greatest cautionary tale told to young Swift was that of the country group the Dixie Chicks and how a single political comment shattered the empire the three women bandmembers had built.

In 2003, during a concert in London, Natalie Maines, the lead singer of the Dixie Chicks, admitted that she did not support the impending U.S. war with Iraq. “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all,” she said, and she was met with applause from

the audience. “We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (Wilson, 2020). Before making this comment, the Dixie Chicks, who are from Texas, had achieved mass commercial success in country music and were beginning to find crossover success in pop. This brief comment in London enraged country music fans and industry members alike. Griffiths (2015) says the comment sparked “an ostensibly grass-roots campaign of protest formed with the express intention of turning the Dixie Chicks into national scapegoats” (p. 236). The backlash was violent. The band was blacklisted by radio stations, some of which incited protests outside their offices with trash bins in which fans could dispose of their Dixie Chicks CDs or smash and destroy them completely (Wilson, 2020). The band also received mass criticism in the press and death threats from former fans (Griffiths, 2015).

The Dixie Chicks lost a significant amount of cultural capital from the 2003 controversy and were never able to redeem their image in country music. In 2013, when asked about the prospect of returning to country music, Natalie Maines said doing so would be like “going back to an abusive husband” (Whitaker, 2013). However, after their blacklisting in country music, the Dixie Chicks did reach their peak of mainstream (supported by pop markets rather than country) commercial success with the release of their 2006 album *Taking the Long Way* (Griffiths, 2014). The story of the Dixie Chicks’ loss of clout in country music influenced how Taylor Swift’s team advised her career choices. “Throughout my whole career,” Swift says, “label executives and publishers would just say, ‘Don’t be like the Dixie Chicks’” (Wilson, 2020).

Swift listened to the warnings to remain apolitical before the election of Donald Trump. In 2020, now 30 years old, Swift describes her younger self as “so obsessed with

not getting in trouble” that she was afraid to speak about anything remotely political: “I was like, I’m just not gonna do anything that anyone could say anything about” (Wilson, 2020). Swift’s political silence worked well for her career in her early years as a singer-songwriter. In a 2012 interview with David Letterman, Swift said, “I feel like at 22, it’s my right to vote, but it’s not my right to tell other people what to do.” Swift’s statement was met with applause from the audience and a fist bump of approval from Letterman, who gives an approving, “Right there, sister, come on!” (Wilson, 2020). The backlash the Dixie Chicks received was inarguably linked to their gender, and perhaps to their young age as well. They were called “The Dixie Sluts,” “the Ditzzy Twits,” “ignorant,” the “dumbest bimbos,” “Saddam’s Angels,” and “callow, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around,” among other things (Wilson, 2020). Aware of this gendered backlash, Swift’s political statements in her early twenties deemed her opinions valueless before critics had the chance to do so. “I’m a 22-year-old singer,” she reminded audiences, citing both her age and her profession as markers that discredit her right to speak publicly about her values, “I don’t know if people really want to hear my political views. I think they just kinda want to hear me sing songs about break ups and feelings” (Wilson, 2020). Each time, she was met with approving laughs and applause from the audience.

Beginning in the year 2016, Swift began to receive public criticism for her political silence. Critics and fans alike craved a progressive political endorsement from the pop star as Donald Trump rose to power. An editorial piece in *The Guardian* (2017) argued that Swift was “an envoy for Trump’s values.” The contributor writes, “Her silence is striking, highlighting the parallels between the singer and the president: their adept use of social media to foster a diehard support base; their solipsism; their laser

focus on the bottom line; their support among the ‘alt-right.’” Reporters for Racked and The Verge mused that Swift’s photo of herself wearing a sweatshirt draped around her shoulders was a sub-textual symbol that she was voting for Hillary Clinton in 2016 (Jennings, 2016). One of the most popular Google searches in the fall of 2016 was, “Who is Taylor Swift voting for?” (Garis, 2016). In 2017, BuzzFeed staff writer Ellie Woodward wrote a more than 60,000-word article titled, “How Taylor Swift Played The Victim For A Decade And Made Her Entire Career,” which criticized Swift for many things, including “[invoking] feminism to ensure her posture as victim,” rather than understanding feminism to be a political movement. Online alt-right subcultures took Swift’s political silence as an indication of her white supremacist values in 2016, calling her an “Aryan Goddess” (Sunderland, 2016).¹⁰ Swift was able to stay silent during this era because of her privileged identity: as an exorbitantly wealthy white woman, she was not put in compromising situations based on political shifts.

Still, Swift did not make any formal political statements (beyond an occasional tweet stating, for example, that she was proud to be a woman on the day of the 2017 Women’s March, or that everyone should vote on Election Day in 2016) until just before the midterm elections in 2018. Swift wrote a social media post encouraging her followers to register to vote and stating that she would not be voting for Republican Marsha Blackburn as senator of Tennessee because Blackburn has voted against legislation protecting the civil liberties of women and the LGBTQ+ community. Swift wrote, “I

¹⁰ In a 2019 interview with Rolling Stone, Swift claimed that she did not hear about these alt-right accusations until after they had been handled by her team. She said her family and publicist kept the information from her because she “was not in a good place” in her personal life. In the same interview, she clarified, “There’s literally nothing worse than white supremacy. It’s repulsive. There should be no place for it” (Hiatt, 2019).

always have and always will cast my vote based on which candidate will protect and fight for the human rights I believe we all deserve in this country.” In the 24 hours after Swift’s Instagram post, there were 65,000 new voter registrations (Blackmon & Rosenbaum, 2018).

The shift in Swift’s view of her responsibility—and her right—to speak about politics in her role as a singer-songwriter happened as a result of “several events in [her] life and in the world in the past two years,” she writes (Blackmon & Rosenbaum, 2018). But it is also a reflection of a shift in expectations for artists, and of Swift’s keen awareness of the more marketable choice at any given time. Swift benefitted from the political silence that she maintained—the silence that the Dixie Chicks failed to maintain—in the beginning of her career. As American politics and culture shifted in and around 2016, Swift began to receive criticism for her silence. She then adapted to a demand, albeit a few years later, like she had earlier in her career; in each of these contrasting eras, Swift makes the choice that is more commercially successful at the time, according to the demands of her consumers.

In 2020, Swift capitalized on not only her relatively new political transparency, but on the distinction between her old and new methods. The 2020 documentary *Miss Americana* is a Netflix film about Swift’s struggles with fame.¹¹ A poignant scene in the

¹¹ Along with the release of the documentary came the release of the single, “Only The Young,” written by Swift and Joel Little about the potential of young voters and young political candidates. Singing about the 2018 midterm elections, Swift says, “The game was rigged / The ref got tricked / The wrong ones think they’re right,” mentions “the big bad man and his big bad clan” who, when faced with legislation surrounding gun control, “aren’t gonna help us / [they’re] too busy helping themselves” (Wilson, 2020). The chorus of the song offers some optimism, with Swift insisting that “only the young can run” for office (or, as she jokes in *Miss Americana*, “from fascism!”)

film shows Swift shortly before the 2018 midterm elections explaining to her father and two unnamed men—assumedly members of her management company, of which Swift is the CEO—why she feels compelled to share an explicitly political statement for the first time ever. Her father fears for her safety—“The bottom line right now: I’m terrified. I’m the guy who went out and bought armored cars.” Her team member worries about the potential economic loss—“Imagine if we came to you and said, ‘Hey, we’ve got this idea that we could halve the number of people who come to your next tour,’” his positioning reminiscent of the Dixie Chicks’ cautionary tale. The economic concern expressed by Swift’s team member did not consider the context in which Swift was making her political statement. Audiences were desperate for Swift’s (socially liberal) politics to be revealed. On her decision to share the post, Swift says she “[needed] to be on the right side of history,” and that she is “sad” that she did not speak up “two years ago” in 2016 (Wilson, 2020).

Miss Americana frames Swift’s choice to speak out as a purely brave one, not something that could, rather, lead to an improvement of her brand—and therefore commercial success—in an era, genre, and industry that asks celebrities to be openly socially liberal. Instead, Swift is framed as a righteous, courageous woman compelled by her own experiences to use her voice, regardless of what it may cost her. Now, in 2020, Swift blurs her early career branding as a “good girl” and argues girls and women are praised for being silent in controversial times. She says:

I think one theme that ended up emerging [in *Miss Americana*] is what happens when you are not just a people pleaser but someone who’s always been respectful of authority figures, doing what you were supposed to do, being polite at all costs.

I still think it's important to be polite, but not at all costs. Not when you're being pushed beyond your limits, and not when people are walking all over you. I needed to get to a point where I was ready, able, and willing to call out bullshit—rather than just smiling my way through it. (Willman, 2020)

Swift's personal branding as a "good girl," then, is replaced by that of a "brave woman"—one who speaks publicly about feminism, politics, and other controversial matters, and does not "care about repercussions" (Willman, 2020).

Although she strengthens her brand, and therefore her individual success and economic empowerment, by appealing to audience demand in each chapter of her career, Swift should not be treated as *only* a brand. There are certainly elements beyond her commercial viability that lead a young woman to make or not make political stances as a massive global superstar, just as there are multiple elements that everyday women have to consider when doing the same in their personal and professional lives. Swift cited her age as a reason not to speak out during the 2012 presidential election—an argument no longer as tenable in an era when teenage activists like Emma González and Greta Thunberg have become household names for their advocacy for progressive policies around gun control and climate change, respectively. But given the belittling, sexist reaction to the Dixie Chicks, it is easy to see how Swift could internalize a view of herself as unqualified, uninformed, and unworthy of speaking out. Swift told NPR in 2012:

I think at 22, I'm still gathering information about who I am as a person. I know who I'm going to vote for, but I don't think it's important for me to say it, because it will influence people one way or another. And I just want to make sure that every public decision I make is an educated one. (NPR Staff, 2012)

Reflecting on her 2016 silence, Swift told Vogue in 2019 that she worried her voice would not be beneficial for a candidate. The election came at a time when Swift was being condemned by media outlets and fans alike for her ongoing, tabloid-embraced feud with Kim Kardashian and Kanye West (“#TaylorSwiftIsASnake” and “#TaylorSwiftIsCancelled” were ubiquitous on social media, and they quickly escalated into a months-long campaign to “cancel” Swift) (Aguirre, 2019). This led to the poor reputation after which her sixth album would later be named. Swift cited her bad press as a reason she did not speak up sooner:

Unfortunately in the 2016 election you had a political opponent [Donald Trump] who was weaponizing the idea of the celebrity endorsement. He was going around saying, “I’m a man of the people. I’m for you. I care about you.” I just knew I wasn’t going to help. Also, you know, the summer before that election, all people were saying was “[Taylor Swift] is calculated. She’s manipulative. She’s not what she seems. She’s a snake. She’s a liar.” These are the same exact insults people were hurling at Hillary [Clinton]. Would I be an endorsement or would I be a liability? *Look, snakes of a feather flock together. Look, the two lying women. The two nasty women.* Literally millions of people were telling me to disappear. So I disappeared. In many senses. (Aguirre, 2019)

In the years 2016 and 2017, Swift was mostly out of the public eye all together, when she took one more year than usual to write and produce her sixth album, *reputation*, in private. *reputation* was released on November 10, 2017, but Swift did not promote it in any interviews or other public appearances. (On social media, Swift confirmed her silence in a caption reading, “There will be no further explanation. There will just be

reputation.”) In *Miss Americana*, Swift explains to her father and team members that she was out of the public eye during those years—hiding both her politics and her personal life—because, “Back in the presidential election, I was in such a horrendous place that I wasn’t gonna pop my head out of the sand for anything” (Wilson, 2020).

Swift’s tumult during these years included testifying in a sexual assault trial. In the summer of 2017, Swift was sued by a DJ who lost his job after she accused him of sexually assaulting her during a meet and greet. The incident—in which the DJ groped Swift beneath her skirt—was captured in a photograph and witnessed by seven people. During the trial, when she was asked why the photo did not explicitly show his hand under her skirt, Swift repeatedly said, “Because my ass is located at the back of my body” (Wilson, 2020). Later, Swift described her experience in court, saying:

You don’t feel a sense of any victory when you win because the process is so dehumanizing...I just wanted to say I’m sorry to anyone who ever wasn’t believed because I don’t know what turn my life would’ve taken if people didn’t believe me when I said that something had happened to me. (Wilson, 2020)

Swift’s appearance in court was one of her only public sightings in 2017, the year when she received perhaps the most criticism for her political silence. In *Miss Americana*, Swift references her experience giving a victim testimony as a reason she was no longer able to stay silent in her late twenties and early thirties. “I experienced [the trial] as a person with extreme privilege, so I can only imagine what it’s like when you don’t have that,” Swift says, describing her newfound need “to speak up about beliefs I’d always had, because it felt like an opportunity to shed light on what those trials are like” (Willman, 2020).

“Something is different in my life, completely and unchangeably different since the sexual assault trial last year,” Swift explains in *Miss Americana*. “No man in my organization or in my family will ever understand what that was like” (Wilson, 2020).

The Personal Becomes Political: Politics Enter Swift’s Trademark Songwriting

As Brown (2012) discussed, Taylor Swift’s fans believe in her authenticity in part because she has written or co-written every song on her albums. It is thus reasonable for fans to expect that a songwriter who has promised “to do more to help” make progressive change because “we have a big race coming up next year” would use her songwriting as a vehicle to support her political messaging (Swift, 2019a). On her *reputation* album (2017) and earlier, Swift never mentioned anything overtly political in her lyrics or music videos—the closest she came was a track on *reputation* called “I Did Something Bad,” co-written with Max Martin and Shellback, which makes reference to a witch hunt. Having shed her apolitical “good girl” image, Taylor Swift released her seventh studio album, titled *Lover*, on August 23, 2019. Swift says in a recorded voice memo on the album that she wants to be “defined by the things that I love, not the things I hate,” and goes on to say, “I just think that you are what you love.”

Swift’s politics did spill into her songwriting on *Lover*, evident in songs like “Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince,” after which her documentary was named. The track (written by Swift and producer Joel Little, who is best known for his work on Lorde’s *Pure Heroine* album) is an allegory of sorts, a tale of the American political system told through the metaphor of an American high school. Swift is the narrator of the song’s love story, as is typical for her songwriting. She writes about her desire to hide away in the wake of the Trump administration, singing, “I saw the scoreboard and ran for

my life,” and describing herself as, “Voted most likely to run away with you.” Her disappointment in American politics is clear through lines like, “American glory faded before me,” and “American stories burning before me,” and she describes herself and others as feeling “hopeless,” “helpless,” “depressed,” “battered and bruising,” and “[painting] the town blue.” The narrative describes precisely what Swift did in the years after Trump’s election; with her reputation suffering (“They whisper in the hallway, ‘she’s a bad, bad girl’”), she escaped the public eye (“No cameras catch my muffled cries”) and spent time alone with her partner (“It’s you and me / that’s my whole world”).

The first-person perspective of “Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince” is evident in another track from *Lover*, titled “The Man,” in the chorus of which Swift sings, “If I was a man / then I’d be the man.” The song (also written by Swift and Little) lists Swift’s predictions of how she would be perceived if she were a man—if she were not a victim of a patriarchal culture. She says she would be perceived as “a fearless leader” and “an alpha type” who “hustled” and “put in the work” and that her success would not be doubted like it is now—“They wouldn’t shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve.” Now, “The Man” is a radio single, and the phrases “fearless leader” and “alpha type” are plastered across merchandise in Swift’s online store, decorating the surfaces of socks, sweat bands, t-shirts, sweatshirts, phone cases, posters, and hats.

The lyrics of “The Man” specifically touch on how Swift’s sexuality would be perceived if she were a man. Given her (derogatory) reputation as a “serial dater,” which is, ultimately, just another way of calling a woman a slut, Swift says that if she were a man who had dated the same way she had, she’d be commended for it: “They’d say I played the field before I found someone to commit to / And that would be okay / for me

to do / Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you” (Valenti, 2014). Referencing the inequalities highlighted by the Me Too movement and likely her own sexual assault trial, Swift asks, “When everyone believes you / what’s that like?” “The Man” is an expression of Swift’s anger and frustration arising from being a wealthy white woman pop star; she explains, “I’m so sick of running as fast as I can / wondering if I’d get there quicker if I was a man,” then describes her subordinate position as a woman, “And I’m so sick of them coming at me again / ‘cause if I was a man / then I’d be the man.” In the bridge, Swift asks her hypothetical male counterpart:

What’s it like to brag about raking in dollars / and getting bitches and models?

And it’s all good if you’re bad / and it’s okay if you’re mad

If I was out flashin’ my dollars / I’d be a bitch, not a baller

They paint me out to be bad / so it’s okay that I’m mad

In November of 2019, Swift performed the chorus of “The Man” at the American Music Awards, surrounded by young girl dancers, before launching into a medley of her hits and being presented the Artist of the Decade award by Carole King.

During this performance of “The Man,” Swift donned a men’s dress shirt with the name of each of her past albums on it. This stylistic choice was a pointed reference to her recent controversy over the ownership of her past albums. After completing a ten-year contract with Big Machine Records, Swift signed a new record deal with Republic Records, an imprint of Universal Music Group. Swift was the first artist ever signed to Big Machine, an independent country music label, in 2005. Its founder, Scott Borchetta, is known for his trademark belief, “Music Has Value,” which he references in response to changes in the streaming music industry. In her new recording contract, Swift maintains

ownership of all her masters going forward, which means the *Lover* album, but she surrenders ownership of her previous six albums (and various EPs and singles) to Big Machine. Swift's loss of her masters is typical for a recording contract of this nature, especially since Swift was a relatively unknown artist (and a teenager) when she began negotiating with Borchetta. Swift wanted to purchase the ownership of her own recordings, though, and Big Machine was allegedly not willing to negotiate. Swift wrote in a Tumblr post in June 2019:

For years I asked, pleaded for a chance to own my work. Instead I was given an opportunity to sign back up to Big Machine Records and “earn” one album back at a time, one for every new one I turned in. I walked away because I knew once I signed that contract, Scott Borchetta would sell the label, thereby selling me and my future. I had to make the excruciating choice to leave behind my past. Music I wrote on my bedroom floor and videos I dreamed up and paid for from the money I earned playing in bars, then clubs, then arenas, then stadiums. (Bate, 2019)

Big Machine was sold to Ithaca Holdings, a media company owned by Scooter Braun, a record executive, who has found great success managing artists including Justin Bieber, Kanye West, and Ariana Grande. Swift has spoken about the sale of her masters as both a personal and professional injustice. Swift claims she experienced “incessant, manipulative bullying” from Scooter Braun. Supporting her claim, Swift wrote:

Like when Kim Kardashian orchestrated an illegally recorded snippet of a phone call to be leaked and then Scooter got his two clients together to bully me online about it...Or when his client, Kanye West, organized a revenge porn music video which strips my body naked. Now Scooter has stripped me of my life's work, that

I wasn't given an opportunity to buy. Essentially, my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it. This is my worst case scenario. This is what happens when you sign a deal at fifteen to someone for whom the term "loyalty" is clearly just a contractual concept. And when that man says, "Music has value," he means its value is beholden to men who had no part in creating it. When I left my masters in Scott's hands, I made peace with the fact that eventually he would sell them. Never in my worst nightmares did I imagine the buyer would be Scooter. Any time Scott Borchetta has heard the words "Scooter Braun" escape my lips, it was when I was either crying or trying not to. He knew what he was doing; they both did. Controlling a woman who didn't want to be associated with them. In perpetuity. That means forever. (Bate, 2019)

Swift's argument for her creative property is linked repeatedly to her experiences as a woman in the music industry. Her mention of men "controlling a woman" insinuates that her experience in this contractual situation would be different if she were a man, or at the very least, her personal reaction to being controlled would be different. In the music video for "The Man," Swift makes reference to the sale of her masters. In one scene, the titles of her previous albums are written on a wall in graffiti, along with two signs. One states, "If found, return to Taylor Swift," and the other is a street sign drawing of a scooter with a line crossed through it. The music video in its entirety—which stars Swift disguised as a man, receiving praise for things women do without acknowledgement or with condemnation, such as throwing a temper tantrum after losing a tennis match, taking his child to a park, succeeding in business, and partying with models in bikinis on a yacht—is a critique of the sexist double standards Swift has experienced in the music

industry. The video was directed by Swift, and in its last scene, she calls cut, and the man Swift is playing asks director Swift, the woman, how he can improve his performance on the next take. “Uh, could you try to be sexier?” Swift says. “Maybe more likable this time?”

It is impossible to measure how much gender plays a role in how Borchetta and Braun have treated Swift—it is likely that her contract would not change, but the “revenge porn” Swift accuses Kanye West of releasing certainly would have had a different effect if Swift were not a woman. Acutely aware of surface-level gender roles for men and women, Swift is quick to protest when they are applied to her. Shortly before her performance of “The Man” at the 2019 American Music Awards, Swift released another statement, writing that she was being stopped by Borchetta and Braun from performing her old songs at the award show, and stopped from using her old music in her upcoming documentary *Miss Americana*. Swift asked readers to “let Scott Borchetta and Scooter Braun know how you feel about this” (Swift, 2019b). One of Borchetta’s conditions of letting her use her old music, Swift says, was that she must “stop talking about him and Scooter Braun” (Swift, 2019b). Swift described this message as, “Be a good little girl and shut up. Or you’ll be punished” (Swift, 2019b). In keeping with her newfound dismissal of the “good girl” image, Swift was adamant about her refusal to keep quiet. “I feel very strongly that sharing what is happening to me could change the awareness level for other artists and potentially help them avoid a similar fate,” she wrote (Swift, 2019b). Throughout this controversy and her statements earlier in the decade about fair compensation for artists, Swift has highlighted her desire to fight not only for her own intellectual property, but to set a precedent in the industry that is better for “the

young songwriter who just got his or her first cut and thought that the royalties from that would get them out of debt” (Helman, 2015).

Though she did not explicitly state it, in these written statements, Taylor Swift was challenging a private equity firm called the Carlyle Group, and she used her well established position as a feminist to do so. The Carlyle Group is a global investment firm managing \$224 billion of assets, spanning 374 investment vehicles. As the New York Times reported, “At a time of public outrage over corporate greed and a heightened awareness of gender-based power dynamics, the 29-year-old Ms. Swift was able to turn a commercial dispute into a cause célèbre” (Kelly et. al., 2019). In addition to the massive reaction from Swift’s fans—as she requested, directed at Borchetta and Braun, which they claim led to death threats—Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren retweeted Swift’s post, referencing it as an example of the injustice her progressive presidential campaign was planning to target (Kelly et. al., 2019). Warren wrote:

Unfortunately, [Swift] is one of many whose work has been threatened by a private equity firm. They’re gobbling up more and more of our economy, costing jobs and crushing entire industries. It’s time to rein in private equity firms—and I’ve got a plan for that. (Warren, 2019)

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Bronx and Queens also supported Swift, tweeting:

Private equity groups’ predatory practices actively hurt millions of Americans. Their leveraged buyouts have destroyed the lives of retail workers across the country, scrapping 1+ million jobs. Now they’re holding [Swift’s] own music hostage. They need to be reigned in. (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019)

Consistently, Swift is more willing to be politically outspoken when the issues directly threaten her as a wealthy white woman artist. Swift centers her own narrative in her politics always, in keeping with her role as an autobiographical singer-songwriter that brought her the success she has today. This does not easily make way for Swift to fight for the inequities experienced by those with different privileges than her. But Swift's centering of her own experiences demonstrates the traditional feminist adage that the personal is, in fact, political. As a woman in a patriarchy, Swift experiences sexism on both individual and structural levels; her addressing this sexism when it affects her personally shows how unequal political structures influence everyday experiences, even of the whitest and wealthiest among us.

Swift's feminism makes a reappearance when she is at the center of the controversy or hardship. This is not a wholly negative critique; it is logical for a person to be more personally invested in an injustice that directly affects her. In this way, she demonstrates her understanding of feminism as an identity to be adopted as a source of individual empowerment, as is typical of neoliberal feminism (Zaslow, 2009). Swift, however, does not entirely fulfill the expectation neoliberal feminism for girls and women to "play with power, taking it on and off at will" (Zaslow, 2009, p. 3). She uses her feminism to advance her career when it is convenient to do so, thus taking on her power like Zaslow (2009) describes. Yet Swift does not necessarily take that power off; when she is not at the center of a controversy, she may not be openly discussing feminism, but she does not represent herself as disempowered, either. She leans fully into feminism when it centers her own experience, but she remains more neutral, more still on Tatum's conveyor belt rather than actively walking along with it. She does not become

the neoliberal sexual subject (Gill, 2003), nor does she flip to opposite sides of a binary that neoliberal feminism presents for girls and women: girly vs. powerful, mother vs. professional, sexy for male pleasure vs. sexy for her own pleasure (Zaslow, 2009).

The love about which Swift sings on *Lover* is not only her own heterosexual relationships, unlike on her past albums. The second single from *Lover*, released in June 2019, is a song called “You Need To Calm Down,” in which Swift sings about people experiencing hate online; most of all, the song criticizes homophobia. Swift asks hateful listeners, “Why are you mad, when you could be GLAAD?”, referencing the organization that works for better queer representation in media.¹² “You Need To Calm Down” (written by Swift and Little) was released along with a music video for the song starring many LGBTQ+ celebrities, including Todrick Hall (who co-executive produced the video with Swift), Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Laverne Cox, Ellen Degeneres, Jonathan Van Ness, and several drag queens well known within the queer community. These celebrities are shown living together in a vibrantly colorful trailer park, a utopia free from hatred, where the homophobic protestors pictured have no influence on the success, love, and happiness of the characters. The video is littered with cute, colorful, even flamboyant symbols, including fruity drinks, multi-colored candies, floral wallpaper and bedspreads, pink champagne and cotton candy, and a sequined phone case for Swift. Most of the characters’ dress is noteworthy, and as Morris (2019) notes, their dress is the only

¹² The official lyric video for the song confirms the spelling to be “GLAAD,” rather than “glad.” Swift made a donation to the organization when she released the single, and she had donated to LGBTQ+ organizations in the past (Cuaterucci, 2019). After the song’s release, GLAAD saw an increase in donations (Aniftos, 2019).

personification these characters receive because they are “auxiliary personalities...in service of [Swift’s] brand and persona. No one else’s stardom or skill has more to do than endorse hers.” These characters wear the stereotypical attire of the “flamboyant queen,” who, as described by Hart (2000), presents a sassy and hyperfeminine version of gay male masculinity (p. 60). Swift herself takes on this stereotype, wearing gaudy, oversized sunglasses and heart-shaped earrings, a bright pink fur coat and bikini to match, and rainbow-colored hair, as she struts around the vibrant trailer park like a tough, proud, unaffected leader of a gay pride parade. The last scene of the video is a message that reads, “Let’s show our pride by demanding that, on a national level, our laws truly treat all of our citizens equally. Please sign my petition for Senate support of the Equality Act on Change.org.”

The music video for “You Need To Calm Down” received both praise and criticism from reviewers who examined Swift’s release during Pride Month, questioning whether Swift was participating in allyship or appropriation. A journalist for *The Daily Beast* notes that Swift borrows queer black slang in the song, singing, “You just need to take several seats,” and, “Shade never made anybody less gay” (Julian, 2019). In a heteronormative culture where—as Swift highlights—homophobia still exists on both personal and political levels, her claim that “shade never made anybody less gay” is glib at best and dismissive at worst. By releasing a wholly triumphant song about (certain) marginalized identities, Swift dismisses the pain and pressure typically experienced by members of the queer community. When Swift uses the word “shade” here, listeners can assume Swift is referring to homophobic slights and subordination, which have certainly pressured queer individuals to further suppress their sexual orientations. Perhaps the

closeting of queer people does not constitute truly making them “less” gay, but critics were quick to argue that Swift, who has only ever publicly identified as heterosexual and cisgender, uses the gloss and glamor of a commercialized, widely palatable, rainbow-colored pride movement as an appealing aesthetic without any mention of the struggles of queer individuals (Holmes, 2019).

Homophobia is further trivialized in “You Need to Calm Down,” Grady (2019) argues, when Swift draws a comparison in the song between her experiences being criticized and the experience of discrimination based on sexual orientation. The lyrics of “You Need To Calm Down” that are not about homophobia are about general bullying and take-down culture. In the bridge, she sings, “And we see you over there on the internet / comparing all the girls who are killing it / but we figured you out / we all know now / we all got crowns / you need to calm down.” In the music video, as this line plays, we see drag queens lined up and dressed as famous female pop stars, including Swift herself, cementing her insistence that she’s singing about her own experiences of criticism. By including her experience with hatred in the same depth that she includes that of members of the queer community, Swift suggests the two offenses are equally wrong. She insinuates that successful white woman pop star is a marginalized identity in a similar way to identifying with any non-normative gender or sexuality is. In this way, Swift’s authentic, personal songwriting and “relatability” that has characterized her career compels her to relate to the subject matter a bit too closely—rather than stepping back and singing only about the tribulations of a group to which she does not belong, she draws a comparison, a failed attempt at empathy, between herself and a marginalized group.

There is a group of homophobic protestors in the video who have no effect on the triumphant queer characters basking in the sunshine. The protestors—inspired by a conservative group that protests outside Swift’s concert tours in the U.S.—are disgruntled men and women with meagerly made signs with slogans such as, “Adam + Eve Not Adam + Steve,” and, “Get A Brain, Moran [sic., and a reference to a cultural moment from the Iraq War]” (Agguire, 2019). The protestors stand in stark contrast to the proud characters in the video, not only because of their homophobic views, but in their style of dress and attitude. Ma (2019) argues that the group is a caricature of the rural American working class. They are depicted as “unkempt, unshowered, and uneducated,” with ripped clothing, stringy hair, and misspelled signs (Ma, 2019). The semiotics of this contrast between characters in the music video perpetuates a myth that homophobia—or conservative or regressive views in general—is fueled primarily in the deep south and by working class people who cannot afford a proper education. This depiction is ignorant to the realities of oppression of everyday queer people beyond the celebrities with whom Swift is friends and co-stars. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ+ Americans are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed, and one in four members of the queer community face food insecurity (Ma, 2019). All the while, the entire music video takes place in a trailer park, a type of housing development that in media discourse has been given negative connotations associated with “low” class, (willful) unemployment, and a lack of education (Harry, 2004). In terms of social class, many of the queer individuals whom Swift is trying to liberate may relate more to the depictions of the protestors (minus the hate-filled signs). Many of Swift’s queer fans are likely unable to be openly queer and camp, either, and her asking them to opt out of the closet and into

celebrations of pride does not address the discrimination on a structural level that can lead to violence or oppression for real-life members of the LGBTQ+ community. In arguing this point, I am aware that Swift is, ultimately, a straight pop star, and I do not expect all of her political messages to be perfectly progressive. But Swift's depiction of queer people as stylish and glamorous reveals Swift's major blind spot when it comes to social class as an identity marker. The progressive people on Swift's side have money, while the regressive haters do not, and this message is classist.

On June 1, 2019, two weeks before the release of "You Need To Calm Down," Swift posted on social media in honor of Pride Month with a letter to her senator, Republican Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, asking him to support the Equality Act in the Senate. "For American citizens to be denied jobs or housing based on who they love or how they identify, in my opinion, is un-American and cruel," Swift wrote in the letter (Swift, 2019c). In the caption of the post, Swift asked her readers to follow her lead, and offered hope of her celebrity attention as an incentive, writing, "I urge you to write to your senators too. I'll be looking for your letters by searching the hashtag #lettertomysenator." The apolitical silence Swift was once praised for had never been more clearly washed away, as she wrote:

Our country's lack of protection for its own citizens ensures that LGBTQ people must live in fear that their lives could be turned upside down by an employer or landlord who is homophobic or transphobic. The fact that, legally, some people are completely at the mercy of the hatred and bigotry of others is disgusting and unacceptable. Let's show our pride by demanding that, on a national level, our laws truly treat all of our citizens equally. (Swift, 2019c)

Swift also started a petition on change.org to collect signatures urging senators to support the Equality Act and asked her more than 100 million followers to sign it. Swift was aware of the power of collective action toward social change “on a national level” in this exchange. “Politicians need votes to stay in office. Votes come from the people. Pressure from massive amounts of people is a major way to push politicians towards positive change,” she wrote (Swift, 2019c). At the time of this writing (March 2020), Swift’s petition has 622,727 signatures. It received positive responses from then-Democratic presidential candidates including Amy Klobuchar, Beto O’Rourke, Kirsten Gillibrand, Elizabeth Warren, and Cory Booker, among other politicians (Díaz, 2019).

At the 2019 Video Music Awards, about 3 months after she released the petition and letter to her senator, Swift was awarded the Video of the Year award for “You Need To Calm Down.” During her acceptance speech, surrounded by many of the LGBTQ+ stars of the music video, Swift reminds viewers of the petition and thanks them for signing, saying, “It now has half a million signatures, which is five times the amount it would need to warrant a response from the White House,” then tapped her wrist as if she were checking her watch. The White House responded the following day, with deputy press secretary Judd Deere saying, “The Trump administration absolutely opposes discrimination of any kind and supports the equal treatment of all; however, the House-passed bill in its current form is filled with poison pills that threaten to undermine parental and conscience rights” (Friedlander, 2019).

Taylor Swift's actively anti-homophobic and pro-feminist lyrics, music videos, public statements, and legislative calls illustrate a trend described by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser and their 2012 book *Commodity Activism*:

Social action in the neoliberal era is, thus, characterized by the increasing presence of Hollywood celebrities, pop icons, and corporate moguls who have stepped in where the state used to be, proliferating privatized forms of welfare and redistribution. (p. 93)

In an age of increasing political neoliberalism, when “the liberal welfare state and its apparatuses of social justice are battered by populist and legal assaults, and as the legitimacy of and resources for public programs wither within the cultural imaginary,” celebrities and philanthropists are expected to fulfill a social change role that previously had been reserved for local and federal government policy makers (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 93). With the rise of the Trump administration, the mainstream was ripe with neoliberal ideology, particularly related to sex and gender. In an era known as postfeminism that is contradictorily being led by a president who uses explicitly sexist rhetoric, it is clear that the state will not step in on behalf of its marginalized citizens. Thus, celebrities such as Swift, who, among others, is “the paradigmatic model for self-branding...and profit potential” face a higher standard of expectations to be politically outspoken (Hearn, 2012, p. 31). This is demonstrated by the shifts in Swift's politics before, during, and after the election of Donald Trump, and the associated public responses to each of her positions. Beginning in 2016, Swift was “called to pull [herself] up by [her] proverbial bootstraps” and fight for her own—and others’—civil rights (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 93). In some ways, a neoliberal government that

does not work for feminist causes *demand*s neoliberal actions from individual feminists, rather than traditionally Leftist conceptions of progress that demand “a complete shift in the pattern of ownership, the expansion of the rights of labor, and the democratization of the relations of production within U.S. society” (Marable, 1995, p. 84).

Yet it is important to note how shifting from apolitical to political stances benefited Swift’s career as not only a singer-songwriter but, newly, as a “social activist herself,” as Banet-Weiser (2012) describes. As Hearn (2012) writes:

Celebrity as image-currency is the apotheosis of social capital and provides a quick and effective way to garner attention for other issues. But, more often than not, the issue, or cause, and the celebrity use each other in a mutually reinforcing synergy of promotion, leaving open the question of whether the cause or the celebrity benefits most from the bargain. (p. 31)

Given the success of Swift’s music career, and particularly the success of “You Need To Calm Down” (the single received a nomination at the 62nd Grammy Awards for Best Pop Solo Performance), Hearn’s question of whether Swift or her causes benefit most is valid. In this case, I argue there is no way to measure which benefits more; rather, I argue that championing progressive messaging can benefit both the message and the messenger simultaneously. There is an “ironic promise of political action borne out of neoliberalism itself,” and thus social action that benefits the actor cannot be dismissed as wholly inauthentic, opportunistic strategies (Mukherjee, 2012, p. 118). Swift embraces progressive causes from within a neoliberal system; she makes neoliberal choices because she is confined by said system, which is built upon “circuits of consumption and exchange” (Mukherjee, 2012, p. 118). The system itself is contradictory, making way for

contradictory progressive action. Swift's social action demonstrates what Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) call "the messy push and pull of autonomy and subjugation" (p. 94). Although Taylor Swift is more privileged and powerful than her consumers in a neoliberal system, she is not all-powerful, and she works as an actor within a capitalist system who both challenges existing marginalization exacerbated by neoliberalism and simultaneously benefits from said marginalization.

Conclusion: Swift as the Eternal Center of the Song

When Taylor Swift began releasing music as a teenager, she was praised for her songwriting abilities by both critics impressed by her pen and fans who reveled in hearing their everyday experiences reflected in writing. Her songwriting was and remains Swift's greatest strength as a pop star and celebrity, and she is aware of this herself, stating, "I know that without me writing my own songs, I wouldn't be here" (Wilson, 2020). When allowing politics to enter her songwriting, though, Swift's greatest strength becomes her greatest weakness—she struggles to step away from her own identity when writing about marginalized identities she does not claim herself. This makes it nearly impossible for Swift to address issues of race and social class as a wealthy white woman, and it makes way for what many have deemed a presentation of "white feminism" (see Sinke, 2020).

Journalist Kiddest Sinke, in a critique of Swift's music video for "The Man," demonstrates this fine line precisely:

While the high-budget production attempts to satirize toxic masculinity by poking fun at double-standards, it ultimately falls flat due to its reliance on overdone white feminist tropes that ignore the complex spectrum of female experience, especially for women-of-color... The most redeeming moment of "The Man"

occurs when Swift drops the faux-feminist persona, and instead tackles her personal life...By drawing on this experience, Swift shifts a laughable performance into a vulnerable one; eliciting, at the very least, 15 seconds of empathy for the pop star, who even at the top of the music pyramid, must deal with male greed and abuse of power. And while Swift fails to acknowledge the extra hoops that women of color—such as Lizzo, Princess Nokia, Nicki Minaj and other artists—must jump through to achieve musical success, her music video “The Man” seems like a genuine attempt to orient herself as an ally, at least when it comes to rich women getting creative ownership over their work. (Sinke, 2020)

As demonstrated by Sinke’s reaction to the music video for “The Man,” Swift receives praise when she shares her personal life, but she receives criticism for not simultaneously reflecting others’ personal lives in the very same writing. But sticking to her own narratives only, completely removing the personal from the political, as she did in the beginning of her career, also led to criticism for Swift. This is the downfall of expecting autobiographical songwriters to make perfectly progressive political statements.

I argue that Swift could not have held her tongue for much longer because, as second wave feminists warned, the personal is political. As a woman who has built a professional career contingent on the sharing of her personal life, it was inevitable that politics would infiltrate Swift’s work eventually if she were to continue writing honestly, as fans expected from her. Swift, ultimately, fulfills a role that perhaps should not be granted to a singer-songwriter in the first place—she is placed on what writer Roxane Gay (2014) dubs a “Feminist Pedestal,” on which people “are expected to pose, perfectly,” until they “get knocked off when they fuck it up” (p. xi). But within a culture

characterized by neoliberal, postfeminist ideology, which is being led by a president who openly repudiates the feminine (Gentile, 2018) and publicly objectifies girls and women in his rhetoric and actions (Valenti, 2019), mass media audiences turn to pop stars such as Taylor Swift for (socially) progressive messaging lacking elsewhere in American politics.

Conclusion

Again I turn to Beverly Daniel Tatum's (2010) metaphor of the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway, and I ask where these two pop stars stand on that conveyor belt—and most of all, why we are interested in deciphering precisely where they stand. If walking forward on the conveyor belt means that a person is actively perpetuating racism—or sexism, or classism, as I proposed, extending the metaphor in my introduction—I do not argue that Ariana Grande or Taylor Swift are walking forward. This is simple to say, and if they were doing so, a complex analysis likely would not have been necessary. Instead, the nuance lies in how much each of these artists stands still or walks actively in the opposite direction on the conveyor belt, lest they find themselves naturally carried forward.

I argue that Ariana Grande's textual and visual work is not actively anti-racist.¹³ In her lyrics and music videos, she appropriates the cultures of people of color when it benefits her, then sheds these cultural signifiers when it is more beneficial for her to be white. She scatters Japanese symbols throughout the “7 rings” music video, references hip-hop songs by black artists without crediting them as writers on the track, and maintains a racially ambiguous skin tone that allows her to pass as Latina and therefore enhance her sex appeal—none of these are examples of actively anti-racist work. She is not overtly racist—not walking forward toward white supremacy—but she is also not

¹³ In organizing my conclusion into categories of racism, sexism, and classism here, my intention is not to dismiss the importance of intersectionality when discussing experiences of oppression, as described by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), particularly as it relates to feminism. I recognize the intersecting nature of gender, race, and social class, as demonstrated by the ambiguity of my sections throughout my analysis; I am simply aiming to clearly organize this particular section.

working to challenge racist tropes in her music. However, Grande's work with and support of artists of color add to her credibility as an actively anti-racist person, leading her a small bit closer to actively resisting the conveyor belt. It is also important to note that Grande speaks openly about her Italian American heritage, and does not explicitly claim to be anything other than white.

In her depictions of female sexuality in music videos and lyrics, Grande objectifies herself and other women. She is personally empowered by her public (hyper)sexuality, but she does nothing to challenge the objectification of other women and girls; instead, she releases mass media texts that adhere to the male gaze and normative standards of beauty. Grande stands still on the conveyor belt of sexism: she condemns it in her rhetoric, but she adheres to and benefits from a girl power media culture that tells women their hypersexualized appearances and strong work ethics will lead to their own personal liberation, rather than collective social action and structural support.¹⁴

Grande's own social class as a multi-millionaire provides material for several of her tracks, including "7 rings." Her wealth is flaunted, and she speaks of the empowerment derived from her ability to purchase the things she wants. The consuming of elite goods makes Grande happy and empowered. As a pop star whose star texts construct her as an empowered, feminist woman, her wealth plays a role in that construction—in other words, Grande's feminism is rooted, at least in part, in her

¹⁴ A future study could examine the accusations made against Grande for participating in queer bating, as she vaguely references that she may be bisexual but never explicitly confirms or denies her sexual orientation.

financial success. This is far from an anti-classist version of feminism, far from actively walking in the opposite direction on the conveyor belt. Again, while Grande does not actively oppress working class people, she glamorizes her wealth and thus glamorizes the exploitative capitalist system that allowed her to garner so much wealth but allows tens of millions of Americans to live in poverty.

Taylor Swift's use of her white privilege has shifted throughout her career. Early on, Swift's identity as a "good" and "wholesome" girl was inherently linked to her whiteness. She benefitted from her racialized ability to fulfill that role without ever actively challenging racism in any form, with a silence so deafening it led to accusations that she was a neo-Nazi. Since becoming more politically outspoken, Swift has become slightly more anti-racist in that she has clarified her views on white supremacy and racial inequities, moving her slowly against the pull of the conveyor belt. Still, her music centers her own experiences as a white woman, and it does little to incorporate the differing perspectives of women of color.

Swift is actively anti-sexist, albeit from the perspective of a privileged white woman. In her public statements, her lyrics, her music videos, and her political statements, Swift supports feminist politicians and ideologies. She does not rely on sexual objectification (or subjectification) in the way that Grande does, and while her vision of feminism is often tailored to her own experiences as a wealthy white woman, she nonetheless makes an effort to support the liberation of women as a whole. In this way, Swift actively resists the conveyor belt of sexism. Including sexuality as part of gender—for the sake of organization—Swift has recently made attempts to support pro-LGBTQ+ legislation and values in her music. Though her perspectives are oft over simplified and

over glamorized, I argue they are genuine attempts to uplift a marginalized community to which she does not belong.

Swift has much to improve upon if she aims to become actively anti-classist. In the “You Need To Calm Down” music video, Swift and her celebrity friends live in a rainbow-colored trailer park, while their enemies are depicted as unkempt, uneducated, working class people. Despite her philanthropic work (as I write this, Swift is making donations of \$3,000 directly to dozens of her fans to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic) including donations to many individuals and organizations, Swift does not speak publicly, in interviews or her music, about social class inequity or progressive fiscal policy (Aniftos, 2018). In 2019, she went so far as to appear in a commercial for a Capital One credit card, acting (ironically) as a bartender and a waitress in a diner. The commercial advertised a new credit card from Capital One, as well as the opportunity for Capital One customers to access pre-sale tickets to Swift’s upcoming tour (Shaffer, 2019b).

A future study of this topic could include an audience analysis in order to better express the importance of studying pop culture, politics, and progressivism. This study is based upon the belief that media texts both reflect and construct culture, especially when a culture shifts suddenly over a short period of time. As Anne Helen Petersen (2017) argues, “Celebrities are our most visible and binding embodiments of ideology at work” (p. XIII). Thus, studying the political messaging of two of the world’s most popular contemporary singer-songwriters can provide insight into current ideologies, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. But an audience analysis would enhance the meaning

of this study, as it would provide insight into how consumers of pop culture interpret the messages expressed by these artists. For example, although I argue in this study that Ariana Grande perpetuates the sexual objectification of women, as defined by Frederickson and Roberts (1997), it is possible that girls and women feel empowered by these images regardless of their objectifying nature. John Fiske (1992) argues in his scholarship on pop music, “Madonna offers her fans access to semiotic and social power; at the basic level this works through fantasy, which, in turn, may empower the fan’s sense of self and thus affect her behavior in social situations”—the same may be true for fans of Ariana Grande who feel empowered by the ability to fantasize about being as wealthy, sexy, and, ultimately, as powerful as Ariana Grande (p. 74). If this is true, then their interpretations should be validated; they would not discredit the claims I have made here, but they would complicate them, and I urge a future scholar to dig deeper into how there can be such a great disconnect between scholars and consumers.

Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift, as singer-songwriters who construct their enormously successful brands primarily through their lyrics, music videos, social media posts, and public statements, demonstrate what Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) call “the messy push and pull of autonomy and subjugation” (p. 94). Both experience sexism as women in a patriarchy, but both use their positions as subjugated members of society to create a profit, which then benefits them. Grande finds success by leaning into the socially and commercial accepted image of the hypersexual, neoliberal sexual subject; Swift finds success by writing and speaking about her feminist values and her experiences as a woman writer in the music industry. Grande uses her race and skin

tone strategically to buttress the hypersexualized persona for which she is known, benefiting from the exoticization of the sexuality of women of color, then benefitting from white privilege in other moments. Swift's image as an innocent, wholesome girl in her early career relied on her whiteness, and although she has actively worked to dismiss this perception of herself, she has done little to overtly challenge racism or recognize her white privilege (in public). Both artists have extreme wealth and say little about inequities in social class, and Grande actively endorses the empowerment she experiences because of her position as a wealthy white woman.

Grande and Swift make neoliberal choices within a neoliberal system built upon "circuits of consumption and exchange" (Mukherjee, 2012, p. 118). As consumable products, Grande and Swift benefit from these circuits, but this does not dismiss the progressive messaging they choose to champion. Audiences view these artists as empowered women, and they clearly enjoy their presences, perhaps in part because they provide the kind of "empowering fantasy" that Fisk (1992) describes as, "pleasurable to the extent that it reverses social norms, and, when the fantasy can be connected to the conditions of everyday life—when, that is, it is a relevant fantasy—it can make the ideal into the achievable" (pp. 74-75). Swift is particularly good at appealing to fantasy because of the large role she plays in her songwriting, allowing listeners to place themselves within Swift's mindset, potentially creating a closeness between them. Fiske (1992) goes on to argue, "Fantasy is not adequately described by writing it off as mere escapism; it can, under certain conditions, constitute the imagined possibilities of small-scale social change, it may provide the motive and energy for localized tactical resistances" (p. 75). Thus, not only do Grande and Swift exist within the "messy push and

pull of autonomy and subjugation,” their fans do as well as they potentially take an active role in their consumption of these artists’ products (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 94).

The major flaw of Grande’s (potential) attempts to be actively anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-classist is her lack of credit given to groups from which she takes both material and nonmaterial resources. She is empowered by the cultures of people of color by directly taking lyrics, melodies, and images, and she is empowered by women who do not adhere to normative standards of beauty and sexuality (because of race, social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, appearance, etc.) by claiming to be empowered by the things they lack. While she does not actively oppress these groups, she does little to liberate them. The major flaw of Swift’s attempts is that in trying to maintain her brand as an autobiographical pop songwriter, she centers her own experiences as a wealthy white woman in songs that could be more nuanced and more potentially empowering to members of the marginalized groups to which she is an ally if she were to step out of the narrative entirely.

I maintain my argument that it is unfair to dismiss celebrities as self-serving opportunists whenever they make progressive political statements or artwork because these celebrities live and work within a neoliberal state that revolves around self-serving capitalist interests which oppress women, people of color, and working class people. The lack of assistance from the state—which could come in the form of legislation that supports feminist causes, anti-racist work, and progressive economic policies, among other avenues—is what requires contemporary celebrities to release political statements and songs. Audiences expect individual artists to release progressive political messages

because the United States government, in the era after the election of Donald Trump, refuses to do so. Celebrities are neoliberal actors within a neoliberal system. As wealthy white women, Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift are victims of the system as well as beneficiaries; they are both complicit in the system and challengers to the system simultaneously.

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