

## UNIFYING DIFFERENCE IN LORDE'S "AGE, RACE, CLASS, AND SEX: WOMEN REDEFINING DIFFERENCE"

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Published in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" is a powerful essay that calls for women to unite, form a cohesive movement, and recognize forms of oppression that go beyond sexism. Lorde accomplishes this by speaking from her perspective as a black lesbian woman, which brings some overlooked issues to light and deconstructs many of the misconceptions and beliefs held by white and black women alike. In addition to exposing some of the problems that maintain a flawed system for dealing with difference, the author discusses how often class and race are linked to the production of various forms of literature. Prose is contrasted with poetry, which Lorde believes is viewed by many as a "less 'rigorous' or 'serious' art form" and, perhaps not coincidentally, is also "the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women" (116). It is interesting, then, to see how the author chooses to deliver this message and how the forms she selects for herself are indicative of her ideas. By incorporating a poem at the end of her piece she is able to reflect her own identity, redefine value, and exemplify how difference can be used to create unity.

Although most writers commit to the conventions of the single genre in which they are composing, Lorde in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" does not seem to discriminate between poetry and prose. Much like this text, Lorde's identity, which she unpacks here, is a complex mix of many different aspects. In this particular case, the fact that she chooses to include a poem at the end of her prose signifies that she is opposed to being constrained, both in her work as a writer and in how she represents herself overall. The author notes in her essay that others often encourage her to single out one component of her identity and put it forward as a depiction of her whole self (120). Not only is she opposed to claiming that a single part of her identity represents her, but she warns us that doing so might conceal other valuable qualities of one's self. Moreover, Lorde argues that this practice is a "destructive and fragmenting way to live" and writes that "[her] fullest concentration of energy is available to [her] only when [she] integrates all the parts of who [she is]" (120). Because she wants to be defined as more than black, or lesbian, or woman, or even poet, she constructs a text where she is able to present various components of her identity.

In addition to reflecting her different selves, the combination of poetry and prose acts as a commentary on society's perception about which forms of literature are more valuable. When she explains how a women's magazine decided to leave out poetry in one of their issues because they viewed it as a "less 'rigorous' or 'serious' art form,"

she exposes how one's ability to produce literature is often influenced by class (116). In fact, Lorde describes how poetry is the most economical of all the art forms because it can be done "between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper" (116). Not only is Lorde acknowledging the class difference by explicitly saying it is cheaper to produce, but she is also creating a relationship between the lower class and poetry by describing the familiar scenarios in which one can write poems. Even though she states that poetry is more economical, she bestows on poetry a different type of worth by emphasizing how writing it requires a fierce commitment. This idea comes to fruition when one considers that, according to Lorde, many women of color who write poetry are also struggling financially and holding more than one job. Lorde then further reframes how we measure value: "For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt" (118). By including a poem in the body of the essay, she is able to reclaim the value not just of her and other black women's poetry, but also their Selves.

And so, the notion that prose and poetry should be equally valued and can be included in the same piece is a metaphor for white women and women of color respectively. In other words, why should poetry and prose be separated just because they are different genres of literature? One of Lorde's main arguments is that people have all been conditioned to respond to difference with "fear and loathing" and to deal with such difference "in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate." This leads to our inability to think of the other as equal and often causes "separation and confusion" (115). In other words, society has taught us that difference is something negative, which is why it becomes very complicated to embrace. In addition, the author argues that pretending those differences do not exist "results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections" and that we need effective tools in order to use difference as a platform for change within our own lives (115). After ten pages of skillfully crafted prose, the poem at the end does stick out. It ought to, if it is a new tool. Yet, it works perfectly because of the thematic similarities it shares with the rest of the speech and because it adds a layer of complexity and emotion. Lorde points out throughout her essay that unity does not require—and is not synonymous with—homogeneity, which is exactly what she shows us in her writing.

To further speak about the thematic similarities between Lorde's prose and poem in her text, one can look at how much they share. At first glance the one stanza at the end seems to be the only form of poetry, but upon closer inspection one finds that there are poetic elements in the prose as well. For instance, when she writes in her prose about how white women often have a fantasy that if they do everything well, they will be allowed to "co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace," she mentions how "unless one lives and loves in the trenches it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is ceaseless" (119). Not only is the language of the sentence

poetic—because it makes use of metaphor and war imagery to speak about oppression—but this same idea is referenced in the poem later. In her verses she writes about women being part of the same fight and of achieving a kind of unity by using words such as “battles,” “war,” “blood,” “win,” and “lose,” which is a nod to the war imagery she used previously (123). The shared imagery and language help Lorde integrate her poetry with her prose, but also challenge the perception that the genres are a perfect binary. In her writing, they overlap and intersect.

Ultimately, in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde urges women to recognize all forms of oppression—such as racism, ageism, and heterosexism—and to wake up to how one’s different experiences and backgrounds can serve as tools for societal change. Not only does Lorde explicitly tell us this, but she also shows it to us in her own writing choices. Although prose and poetry are structurally different, they can work in the same piece when they share the same language and themes. They can reclaim the value of work and the people who perform that labor. Lorde’s writing is as reluctant as she is to single out one feature as a representation of a whole identity.

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# EMBODYING BLACKNESS: VOCABULARY OF RACE IN COATES' “LETTER TO MY SON”

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In his essay, “Letter to My Son,” Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects on the visceral, crippling nature of racism, arguing that the systemic abuse of black bodies is deeply entrenched in America’s history. In articulating this claim, Coates speaks of “white America’s progress,” but he immediately refines the phrase with the qualification “or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white” (2). By doing so, Coates creates a subtle distinction, differentiating “white” as a racial category from “white” as an acquired ideology of distinct groups. He posits that race is not a natural, biological grouping, arguing instead that it is a political mechanism built upon the “pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land” (3). The immediate self-correction serves as a rhetorical cue, drawing attention to Coates’s underlying project.

Careful scrutiny, however, reveals that Coates—although repeatedly invoking “the belief,” “the dream,” and “the religion” of being white—never once defines blackness as an abstract ideological concept. Instead, he does the opposite, making concrete the visceral violence that destructs “black bodies,” cataloging the ways in which racism “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (5). Coates’s different treatment of being black and “the belief in being white,” therefore, creates an apparent inconsistency. Why is it, then, that Coates chooses to approach whiteness as an abstract construct but blackness as literal, embodied and thus inseparable from the physical realm?

Perhaps an entryway to this question is the very anecdote that sparks Coates’s critical inquiry, placed at the opening of his letter. As Coates recounts, a TV host questions him about “the subject of my body” though she did not “mention it specifically” (2). The implicit idea—that the host can reduce Coates’s experience of being black into a merely physical condition—represents, as Coates posits, an undercover rhetoric frequently employed by “intelligent people” to avoid the discomfort of verbalizing racism (2). The emphasis on “body” as the subject of her question is central to Coates’s analysis, because, in summoning Coates to speak on behalf of the physical experience of inhabiting a black body, the host strips him of any agency in deciding whether he believes in the ideological construct of race. In other words, he cannot choose to subscribe to “the belief” of being black, in the same way that his white counterparts may indulge in the assurance of being white, because, after all, in a country where even police departments have been “endowed with the authority to destroy [his] body,” whiteness promises power while blackness represents its very deprivation (4). The implicit invocation of “body,” therefore, reduces Coates’s

experience with race to a raw, unarmored state subjected to the violent consequences of simply embodying blackness. It is no wonder, then, that Coates makes a distinction between being black and “the belief in being white,” as it emphasizes that the former is robbed of agency as soon as their white counterparts indulge in the institutionalized belief system committed to the shackling of black bodies (3).

However, the very distinction that compels Coates to make his initial shift from “white America” to “those Americans who believe that they are white” has an arguably divisive effect (2). How does Coates’s selection of race-related vocabulary advance or undermine his project to respond to the “constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault” of systemic racism (5)? An attempt to answer this question demands a more nuanced reading of the crisp distinction Coates makes between “white” as a racial category and “white” as an acquired ideology. Perhaps it is not unintentional that Coates, in the sheer economy of one clause, uses a simple shift in definition to convey a drastically different idea. This tactic of reframing and redefining concepts through seemingly small shifts in word choices may, in fact, lie at the core of Coates’s rhetoric.

First manifesting itself in the distinction between being white and “the belief in being white,” this strategy is then repeatedly applied to Coates’s use of lists, a more extended form that likewise calls for the subtle refinement of ideas. Without drawing attention to itself, the list format—similar to that of a clause—allows Coates to invoke increasingly pointed language about racial discrimination. For example, as Coates traces the linguistic tradition that downplays the systemic abuse of black bodies, he argues: “But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience” (5). Under the umbrella category of “our phrasing,” Coates groups together four two-word combinations that begin with a form of the word “race” and two with the adjective “white.” The subtle shifts in word patterns create a powerful effect: whereas the first term “race relations” carries arguably neutral connotations, the list becomes increasingly critical with the use of “racial chasm” and “racial profiling,” escalating finally to the unambiguous reproof of “white privilege” and “white supremacy.” The heightened intensity of each term reveals a departure from the traditional rhetorical function of lists: whereas the typical usage allows for more concise, straightforward expressions of similar ideas, Coates again employs the distinct—if not cunning—move to refine and reframe entire concepts through a rapid progression of words. With the same ease and swiftness Coates exhibits in bouncing between being white and “the belief in being white,” he takes advantage of the quiet, unobtrusive quality of a list. By the time one reaches the end of the sentence, the neutral term “race relations” spirals into “white supremacy.” Just as the host mobilizes her vocabulary to downplay racism, Coates demonstrates here that language also has the capacity to do the reverse, allowing him to reclaim power by replacing ideas, acquiring momentum, and building to a crescendo.

Viewed through such a lens, Coates's rhetorical use of clauses and lists—both tactics of escalation—embodies his sustained struggle against racism: first positing that the subtlety of language is frequently mobilized to cement white supremacy, Coates then uses it to reclaim power. After all, how fitting is it that, in pursuing his project to unveil the pernicious ways in which language perpetrates racism, he similarly exploits its creative capacity to coalesce his readers and breathe life into the struggles of embodying blackness? For example, when he deconstructs the myth of the American Dream, he grieves for “the host,” “all those families,” “my country,” and “you,” increasing the number of recipients of that sadness from one individual to his entire nation and finally to the at-once specific (his son) and also universal second person pronoun, “you” (3). When Coates sought answers to explain his purpose “beyond meager survival,” he journeyed through “classrooms,” “streets,” and “continents,” using the sheer increase in geographic territory to convey the futility of his pursuit (5). When he examines the violent consequences of death, he humanizes the notion of loss, from “football games” to “private jokes” to “dreams” to the very “vessel of flesh and bone” (17-18). In all such cases, the tactic of escalation Coates mobilizes represents a larger, thematic mirroring of the content of his writing. By intensifying his ideas and building to a crescendo, Coates acquires the momentum to more forcefully persuade and evoke empathy—both potent ways of reclaiming power. In this light, although Coates's initial distinction between being white and “the belief in being white”—as well as his escalation from “race relations” to “white supremacy”—may seem to create a divisive effect, such replacement and intensification of ideas, in fact, belong to his overarching argumentative strategy to use language to acquire power.

After all, in a particularly self-aware moment of explaining the gradual nature of securing control, domination, and leverage, Coates even admits: “Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining)” (16-17). In a rhetorical context, the at times explicit and at times pernicious nature of power still applies; by reversing the logic of white people who exploit the subtlety of language to cement racism, Coates mobilizes the tactic of escalation to reveal that words also have the creative potential to destroy such a political engine. Circling back to the two interpretive questions that generated this inquiry into Coates's selection of race-related language, one begins to realize that they fundamentally point to the very thesis of his writing: that the struggle for black people is always embodied. To him, a vigorous, unapologetic execution of language represents a way to reclaim power and carve out a share of space that is otherwise invaded in the tangible realm.

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# WHEN DIVAS RISE FROM THE DEAD: TAYLOR SWIFT, UNCANNINESS AND CAPITALISM

KIERA ALLEN

Taylor Swift has died. Again. People who die tend to stay dead, but not Swift; the singer has fueled an outrageously successful eleven-year career with a cycle of symbolic deaths and rebirths. She arrived on the music scene in 2006 as an angelic teenage country singer with perfect curls, a closet full of virginal white dresses, and an album of love songs, and she most recently resurrected herself as a sexy, undead pop diva. In the music video for her 2017 single “Look What You Made Me Do,” she stages a massacre of her past selves, playing her own death(s) in costumes made famous by previous performances. Amid the carnage of the video, a “Zombie Taylor” character emerges, symbolizing the fundamental contradiction of Taylor Swift: the living-deadness of a brand masquerading as a person. Using the song and video as murder weapons against her former self, she provides a prism through which to view her career, public image, and role in American culture.



Taylor Swift appears as a zombie in her music video “Look What You Made Me Do”  
(Mashable)

Swift follows in a long tradition of murdered musicians. In her book *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, philosopher Catherine Clément analyzes how opera exalts its women in order to kill them: men, who control the form, “punish” female characters for straying from their given roles of purity and submission, usually with death (4, 7, 10-11). “Crazy women” kill musicians too; in *In Search of Opera*, world-renowned musicologist Carolyn Abbate alludes to the Bacchantes of Greek mythology, who rip Orpheus limb from limb as he sings (1). The modern-day American public also likes to kill its stars, particularly female ones, for straying from defined roles. Taylor Swift’s original presentation of innocence and romanticism eventually attracted suspicion: how can she write such a devastated breakup song about someone she dated for “like, three weeks” (Dobbins)? And don’t those songs seem designed to embarrass her exes while promoting herself? The public likes to “reduce a woman to her image” and then



destroy that image (Clément 28). As in another Orphic myth, in which Orpheus accidentally sends his beloved Eurydice to the underworld by looking at her, this gaze has a killing power. However, unlike Orpheus or the women of opera, Taylor Swift survives her death. In fact, she can *only* survive through death.

Swift killed herself before public scrutiny could, re-arising as a polished pop star in 2014 and as something darker in 2017. She boasts in “Look”: “I rose up from the dead, I do it all the time.” Certainly, other female stars have rebranded, but few as violently as Swift. Britney Spears, in her famous 2002 music video, kneels on a cliff to sing a piano ballad about an identity in transition: “I’m not a girl, not yet a woman.” By contrast, in “Look,” a Taylor wearing a leotard advertising her new album stands atop a pile of Taylors from previous music videos—2009’s “You Belong With Me” and 2014’s “Shake It Off” included—and kicks them to their deaths. Of all the female opera characters Clément references, Swift perhaps most resembles Carmen, “who chooses to die before a man”—or in the case of Swift, anyone at all—“decides it for her” (53). Swift’s symbolic death lies somewhere between murder and suicide. “Look what you made me do,” she accuses her audience: she killed herself, but only because of the Bacchantes advancing, ready to tear her public image into a heap of lifeless parts. She uses the spectacle of death to keep eyes on her, killing versions of herself to escape total fatality. Singer Miley Cyrus attempted a similar reinvention with the 2013 announcement that she “murdered” her Disney Channel alter ego, Hannah Montana, but unlike Swift, Cyrus did not come back to life (Good). While Cyrus’s 2017 album peaked at #5 on the Billboard 200, Swift’s mini-opera broke the record for the most views within 24 hours for a music video, confirming that Taylor Swift remains very much alive after her deaths (“Miley Cyrus Chart History”; Flanagan).



Taylor Swift atop the mountain of “old Taylors”

Abbate defines the “uncanny” as life emanating from death: “a dead object raised into motion and noise” (192). Hardly any entity could embody this idea better than the singing zombie Swift plays in “Look”: an “animated” corpse, or rather, reanimated (185). Taylor Swift has the outward appearance of life, but in fact, we see nothing more than the representation of a brand. Swift periodically erases any associations her

appearance held, whether to country music or chastity or sophistication, to begin a new (after)life. To signal her transition to pop music, she straightened her signature curls, and for her 2017 rebirth, she replaced her famous scarlet lipstick with “deep ruby” (Stiegman). Her body, constantly repurposed to regenerate her brand, seems more like a talking, singing corpse than a living person. Swift exhibits the uncanniness of Orpheus’s head, which continues to sing even after decapitation (Abbate 3). Clément’s description of one opera diva, a dead woman come back as a ghost, characterizes the unsettling Taylor Swift: “dead. But not quite” (26). *Rolling Stone* magazine uses the same word for Swift’s music video as Abbate does for an example of uncanniness: “nightmarish” (Abbate 188; Spanos).

Swift brings herself back to life with the very “sexual and authoritarian power” for which opera divas receive the death sentence (Clément 10). She appears in “Look” in a cleavage-bearing leotard, brandishing a whip: both sexualized and in charge. The video features sexuality both subtly (Swift erotically strokes her car, slowly squats onto a motorcycle, punctuates her choruses with climactic “oh!”s) and overtly (a head-to-toe outfit of fishnets, tight shots of Swift’s hips and crotch, backup dancers grabbing her buttocks). In order for her celebrity to survive, Swift must submit not only to the killing gaze but also the male gaze, which demands sex. Like the women of opera, “jewels” who occupy central but merely “decorative” roles according to Clément, Swift beautifies the performance of death (5). Whip-brandishing Taylor assembles an army of blank-faced, scantily-clad models in a warehouse, like jewels in a jewelry box, or in one of the tombs and theaters that Abbate mentions, those uncanny “boxy images” and “rectangular prisms” (190). After Swift tells her audience that “the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, ’cause she’s dead!” the camera quickly cuts to Zombie Taylor and then to Fishnet Taylor grabbing her own breasts. Instead of the “love-death” that proliferates in opera, Swift performs sex-death, another variation of life-in-death (Clément 53).

Swift’s uncanniness also manifests itself on the stage of her public life. Clément points out that a careful theater observer can see “operatic effects all over the place,” and Swift’s life has indeed played out like the “perfect spectacle” of opera (12). Abbate defines not singers but “performers” as “dead matter, subject to . . . reanimation” (9). In “Look,” Swift calls herself “the actress starring in your bad dreams”: a nightmarishly uncanny performer. She performs onstage and off, using her highly publicized romances, breakups, friendships and feuds as material for her music. “Look” contains unsubtle references to her breakup with DJ Calvin Harris, her conflicts with reality star Kim Kardashian, rapper Kanye West and pop star Katy Perry, and even her cats (Lang). Like a prima donna entering an opera’s story, she “turns her life into a stage production,” and a lucrative one at that (Clément 38). Swift sells authenticity, blurring the lines between life and business. In the months preceding her past two album releases, she posted public, often paragraphs-long messages to fans, seemingly out of pure generosity (Harris; Weiner). The ploy worked. Headlines pronounced her “THE

GREATEST” and fans sent her music to the top of the charts (Harris). Her performances of authenticity, like the performances in opera, appear “simultaneously utopian and grotesque” because, though life-like, they come from a dead, capitalistic place (Abbate 10).

Swift hinted at her capitalist nature as early as 2007, quipping that “having a top 5 hit . . . will get you over somebody” before launching into an uncanny musical performance of heartbreak about that somebody (“Taylor Swift on The Bus”). We only see the prima donna Swift, the “marionette woman” manipulated to appear human and to attract a paying audience (Clément 25). As both Abbate and Clément describe, these figurative marionettes populate the opera (Abbate 194; Clément 25). But who pulls the strings? Perhaps, in this case, the Taylor Swift lurking just outside the spotlight is the puppet master: the cold, savvy businesswoman. She marketed her 2017 album brilliantly by deleting everything from her social media without explanation, killing the only Taylor Swift we know. This inspired the worldwide trending hashtag, #TS6iscoming, before she had even announced her sixth album (Cook). Swift operates as the object of attention and the “hand that moves from within” that object: both puppet and puppeteer (Abbate 190). However, something else pulls the puppeteer’s strings: a “great masculine scheme” (Clément 6). Out of everyone who contributed to the “Look” video—the producer, director, five songwriters, and head of Big Machine Label—Swift stands out as the only woman.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike the women of opera, Swift has a “deciding role” in addition to a “decorative” one (Clément 5). “Look” cuts from an image of a Taylor lying in a grave to a Taylor posing in a bathtub full of diamonds reportedly worth over \$10 million, signifying her dual roles as wealthy, powerful woman and “jewel,” and depicting money as the reanimating force (Muller; Clément 5).



Taylor Swift, the crowning jewel of her own opera

After so long inside this “machinery surrounding prima donnas”—or, one could say, Big Machinery—Swift “herself becomes a machine” (Clément 27). As in the

musical history Abbate outlines, “associating musical performers with automata . . . evolve[s] historically alongside the automata itself” (196). Swift began her career with acoustic singer-songwriter music, but even her first album involved a massive production effort, crediting forty people other than Swift with such tasks as mixing, mastering, and engineering (“*Taylor Swift... Credits*”); even then, life emanated from machine. As Swift’s image has undergone a “metamorphosis into mechanism” (in the music video for “...Ready for It?”, she even appears as a robot), she has automatized her music (Abbate 220). With “Look,” Swift abandons the illusion that the music comes from one girl strumming a guitar and singing; instead, she produced a synthetic electro-pop track. In lip-syncing to impossibly numerous, synthesized Taylor voices, she becomes “*the machine*,” as Abbate describes the player piano: “the one that reproduces dead music” (Abbate 212).

The public has slowly uncovered the machine beneath the Taylor Swift brand authenticity. “Fake,” they accuse. “Machiavellian.” “Calculated.” Every year, the cries of “LIAR” grow louder (Dobbins). Instead of fighting contradictions to her brand, Swift absorbs them. When her “good girl” image started to falter, she raised her hemlines and replaced romance with cynicism in her lyrics: instead of “forever and always,” she sings “nothing lasts forever”; instead of “never thought we’d have a last kiss,” she begs “when we’ve had our very last kiss . . . remember me”; instead of “she wears short skirts, I wear t-shirts,” she herself dons the “tight little skirt” (*Fearless*; 1989; *Speak Now*). Like the prima donna, she enters “the fiery role assigned to her by the world” (Clément 25). When her authenticity attracted doubt, she used “Look” to emphasize her artificiality. At the end of the video, all of the Taylors stand together and take a bow: all performers, all living-dead. However, even this seemingly truthful admission of uncanniness feels uncanny; behind the Taylors, a spray-painted message reminds the viewer to buy her new album. Taylor Swift has something new to sell: capitalism.



A row of Taylors in front of an advertisement for Swift’s new album, *Reputation*

It makes sense that Taylor Swift ranks among the most successful music acts of the 2010s in America, a time and place that prizes illusions of life. The popularity of social media continues to rise (Greenwood), reality shows dominate TV (Carter), and celebrity culture prevails (Turriago). America has even elected a reality TV star to the

office of President. A capitalistic society commodifies everything, including life. Nobody seems to care that Instagram users edit their photos, or that reality shows do not actually represent reality. Living in a “place of artifice,” which parallels the opera house Clément describes, we have gotten used to uncanniness (8); in fact, we crave it. Swift serves as a perfect mascot for an America that would rather see a representation of life than life itself.

In dramatically killing and reviving herself, Taylor Swift represents both the fallen divas of opera and the uncanniness of musical performance. She has had a profitable journey from chaste prima donna to musical zombie. Her most recent rebranding characterizes her as both dead and alive: a vessel for commercialized authenticity. “Look What You Made Me Do” not only demonstrates the mechanics of her career, it reveals her role in twenty-first-century American capitalism.

#### NOTE

1. For “Look What You Made Me Do” music video credits, see: Lipshutz, Holterman, and Swift, “Look What.”

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# FREE FEMINISM TOMORROW

RYAN MILLER

For \$30 plus tax and shipping, you can be the owner of a 100% cotton, made-in-America t-shirt inscribed in sharp, upper-case font with the four words: “The Future is Female” (“The Future”). Sold since 2015 by the bi-coastal boutique, Otherwild, the shirt and slogan have taken off in popularity and can now be found on coffee mugs and the backs of celebrities as they leave high-end hotels (Meltzer). Even a recent Saturday Night Live sketch referenced the shirt when a guy wore it to demonstrate his feminist cred—that is, in the hopes of impressing a woman he wanted to sleep with (“Girl”). Otherwild writes, “The Future is Female is the past, the present and the future, and is language that resonates” (“The Future”). The popularity of the shirt can attest to the slogan’s resonance and presentness particularly in the age of social media where the hashtag #thefutureisfemale has received countless likes to date. It is also fair to say that “The Future is Female” is the future, given the ability for someone to read the statement literally. This reference to “the past” on the other hand may seem slightly more out of place, but it is likely an acknowledgment of the shirt’s origin: it was designed in 1972 for the opening of a women’s bookstore and later popularized from a 1975 image taken by the photographer Liza Cowan (“The Future”).

As the shirt becomes ubiquitous with the women’s movement, there is some irony to the recent triumph of the “The Future is Female.” For just like the kitschy framed signs at the bar that proudly announce “FREE BEER TOMORROW” with the inherent assumption that there is no free beer *today*, there is also the assumption that today is not “female.” If the shirt has been around for over forty years and we are still having to wear “The Future is Female” as a bumper sticker mantra on our chest, has anything really changed? Furthermore, as we wear the shirt or proudly type the hashtag into our Instagram captions are we convincing ourselves we are changing anything? I would argue that the reasons the shirt resonates with so many are the same reasons why “The Future is Female” shirt is an ineffective medium for change.

For the sake of clarity moving forward, I propose some modest explanation of what it means for a time to be or not be “female,” a nebulous concept with no universal definition. Consider that every society in the world today is a patriarchy, predominantly ruled by men (Cohen). Narrowing in on the United States, women who make up half the population and over half of the work force are “substantially behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions,” according to the Center for American Progress, which cites industries like financial services, in which women “make up 54 percent of the labor force . . . 29 percent of executive and senior level managers and 2 percent of CEOs,” and academia where “only 31 percent of full professors and 27 percent of college presidents” are women (Warner and Corley 1).



Under this leadership, women in the U.S. get paid less than their male counterparts for equal work, lack access to necessary and affordable health care, and have a one-in-three chance of being sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Burke; “Violence Prevention”). Therefore, for a time to be female I suggest, is a time in which women make up an equal or greater share of the power structure in society in order to secure the same rights and opportunities that men possess for a safe and prosperous future.

With this ideal in mind and going back to the shirt, humanities scholar Wendy Doniger’s essay, “Many Masks, Many Selves”—which analyzes the voluntary and involuntary identities, or “masks,” that people inhabit—provides a lens for understanding why the shirt is appealing but possibly unproductive. While many agree that “The Future is Female” is a collective movement, Doniger’s essay, an exploration of and challenge to commonly held beliefs about the authenticity of individual identity, gives context for how the motivations of the individual who purchases the shirt interact within the movement. Doniger writes,

We need an audience to play out the self and a mask to give us that refreshed, vivid sense of self that is inspired by actively playing a role. . . . Moreover, we project what we regard as our best self to the world.” She labels this “upward hypocrisy,” but qualifies that it “can be a very good thing. (67)

Doniger is saying that we represent ourselves in relation to others, and we choose that representation based on what we think is the best way to be represented. If we didn’t have an audience, whether it be the people in public who see us wearing the shirt or our followers on social media who see the photographic, hashtag-accompanied evidence of us wearing the shirt, there would be no need to wear it in the first place. To wear, and therefore project, a belief to the world does not inherently mean we do not hold these beliefs when we are alone; rather, as Doniger argues, the audience necessitates the *expression* of those beliefs as part of the expression of ourselves and our identity. Under this framework we are projecting “what we regard as our best self.” Maybe a shirt or hashtag is not as subtle as a metaphorical mask, but by displaying the message—an easy read for its simplicity—as part of our identity we allow the message to be seen and to connect us to a larger audience, even a movement.

This connective playing-out of the self through the projection of “The Future is Female” is, of course, a performance of our feminist selves: a performance that may be a sincere public expression of our private selves but on a deeper level contains a different kind of deception. Doniger writes, “We assume that masquerades lie, and they often do, at least on the surface. But masquerading as ourselves often reaffirms an enduring network of selves inside us”—implying that despite the possibility for the identities we project, that is, the “masquerades,” to seem disingenuous, the projection can also work both ways. As we put out the belief that the future is female to others, we can become internally more certain and more affirmed of its prophecy and

ourselves as its feminist predictors (67). I am not questioning that those who wear “The Future is Female” on their shirts are not genuine in their beliefs. However, in the act of wearing and declaring “The Future is Female,” there may be the belief by its advocates that by doing so we are more formidable in the quest for gender equality. The overlooked distinction is that while Doniger’s “masquerades” are rooted in “actively playing a role”—exemplified in her essay by references to President Reagan speaking passionately to European leaders who were actually WWII veterans, as if he too had fought in Europe during the war (though likely drawing from memories of his acting days), or the Chevalier/Chelvalière d’Eon portraying himself as a woman portraying herself as a man (61, 64)—the shirt, by contrast, is merely a tool for visual representation, not the actively played role itself. If we want to give the impression that we are fit, we may spend hours at the gym, eat healthy foods, and wear clothes with messages like “Stop Wishing, Start Lifting,” all while posting pictures on Instagram of the aforementioned activities. Alternatively, we can pour ourselves into a pair of Spanx, instantly making our thighs and tummies appear smaller. Both cases might demonstrate “upward hypocrisy” toward a trim figure yet only the former actually (and literally) strengthens the chosen identity of someone in good shape. Yet we continue to wear the same shirt as generations prior, while at the same time fewer women are being elected to government (Cohn). Thus, the question persists: is the “enduring network of selves” within the many individuals who buy and wear the shirt reaffirmed enough to push forward and realize a future that is truly female? Or, is the shirt the feminist equivalent of Spanx?

While pondering the question of gender-equity shapewear, the deficiencies of “The Future is Female” shirt are also illuminated by writer Zadie Smith with the help of her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” which considers, among other things, the varying degrees of identity and ideology a public will tolerate from its artists and politicians. Artists such as Shakespeare, she writes, are given the ability to never be pinned down “to a single identity,” referencing the Keats’ term “negative capability” defined as “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Smith). The benefit for one who is able to engage in negative capability, according to Smith, is that he or she is able to “speak truth plurally” by way of being “a mass of contradictory, irresolvable voices.” In other words, artists are given the reins to speak “simultaneous truths,” despite the possibility of contradiction, because they are not forced by their audience into the strict confines of “singular certainty,” the commitment to a principal, unequivocal identity or belief. For politicians, Smith puts forth the antithesis to negative capability, using what Stephen Greenblatt calls “ideological heroism—the fierce, self-immolating embrace of an idea or institution” (Smith). Politicians must be unwavering in their beliefs or risk being “insufficiently committed to an ideology,” and the more committed they are, Smith argues, the stronger people believe the politician to be. As she stakes these two opposing poles of “negative capability” and “ideological heroism,” “The Future is

Female” shirt resides between the two in a seemingly tempting yet impotent middle ground. On the one hand, “The Future is Female” contains traces of negative capability, found first in the irresolvable “The *Future* is” and then again in the all-encompassing “Female.” The “Future,” an unprovable and undefined time, may give wearers of the shirt optimistic solace free from the limitations of today’s patriarchal reality, while the limitations of today’s patriarchal reality persist all the same. Similarly, the word “Female” may appear to be a succinct way to capture “a mass” of voices, and certainly “Female” encapsulates many identities: black women, white women, trans women, women who believe in traditional gender roles, women who advocate for the total separation of the sexes, just to name a few. Yet while many identities can feel included in this phrasing, the ambiguity of “Female” as an objective abstract both the shared and distinct aims of these varying identities into a mysterious monolith. Rather than allowing these uncertainties and ambiguities to speak truth plurally, “Female” in the “The Future is Female” plays them up for the sake of mass appeal to those varying identities, while hand-waving over what the actual goal of being female means.

On the other hand, and despite adopting aspects of negative capability, simultaneously there are also traits of “ideological heroism” employed in the methodology of the t-shirt (Smith). By purchasing and proudly wearing the shirt there is a sense of declaration. It is a commitment to the non-passive assertion that the future *is* female and gains traction precisely in the political realm where ideological heroism is desired (evidenced by the frequency with which the phrase was invoked in the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton). Yet, again the phrase does not stand for any real policy goals or specified leaders. By existing in this duality, the phrase is not “insufficiently committed to an ideology,” but instead is sufficiently committed to an insufficient ideology.

But “Speaking in Tongues” elucidates more than just lame generalities that may neutralize the shirt and its intent. Rooted in the greater focus of her essay, that is, the communicative powers of Barack Obama, Smith provides another means for considering “The Future is Female.” When Smith writes about Obama’s “story of a genuinely many-voiced man,” she highlights his ability to transcend a “simple linear inheritance, of . . . dreams and aspirations passed down . . . and fulfilled.” She is saying that he did not experience a clean-cut transition of realized dreams between his parents and himself, and instead quotes Obama as saying he “*occupied the place* where [his parents] dreams had been.” To “*occupy* a dream,” Smith argues, is “to exist in a dreamed space” making the distinction that occupying “is surely a quite different thing from simply *inheriting*.” Smith alludes to this distinction earlier when she writes that Obama’s tale is “not the old tragedy of gaining a new, false voice” but rather “is all about addition.” To occupy requires “addition,” engagement, and consideration, whereas inheritance is merely passing along something from one owner to another. In many ways, the women’s movement, similar to Obama, is not the product of “simple linear

inheritance”; previous generations of women were not able to overcome disadvantage and simply pass on a life full of equal opportunity to their offspring (Smith). Consequently, without these realized dreams to inherit, the women’s movement today must instead “occupy” that dream space, and as occupiers there is the opportunity to engage and achieve that vision. Though, by wearing the exact same shirt with a still very much male present, the wearers of “The Future is Female” appear content to inherit those dreams solely to pass them down to the next generation, albeit still as dreams and not as reality. Once again, to wear the shirt is to optimistically hope for the future, while tacitly accepting that the future of yesterday is not today.

Yet, we don’t need to abandon the shirt entirely. Both Doniger and Smith’s essays offer guidance in unraveling the limitations of “The Future is Female.” By using Doniger’s “vivid sense of self that is inspired by actively playing a role,” we see that we can work more towards “actively playing a role” to establish and strengthen that “vivid sense of self.” This may mean that in addition to buying shirts, lighters, or coffee mugs imprinted with hopeful catchalls, we support businesses that pay and promote women equally. This may mean that when we wear the shirt we also volunteer for women’s rights organizations. This may mean we spend a little less time on social media and a little more time educating ourselves and others on the state of gender equality in our communities.

This does not mean we disregard the efforts and strides of those who came before us. As Smith attributes Obama’s success to his ability to embrace “complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives,” which she calls “our collective human messiness,” we should ask for ourselves: what, then, is the history of the shirt? In fact, the back story of “The “Future is Female” is that it came out of the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970’s—a movement that was feminist in its aims, but likely different from the broader aims of the women’s movement today (Meltzer). Yet if Obama achieved his goals, as Smith asserts, precisely because he welcomed and built on to all that came before him, despite complications or differences, the supporters of “The Future is Female” should too embrace and build on its particular past and welcome the fact that the calls for gender equality have never been from one unified voice but rather “multiple” and contradictory “narratives” that may not be so easily simplified into four words. Once we accept that the history of the women’s movement is not neat or simple, we can move on to learning, confronting, and evolving from those complexities. In the hopes of achieving our goals, we must now look to build onto the dreams of those before us.

So, before we continue being hypnotized by the message of that not-yet self-fulfilled prophecy longed for since the 1970’s, I propose we at least start by adding to that message. The Future is Female. The Future is Now.

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# BEYOND THE MONOCHROMATIC: SUFFERING AND EMPATHY THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

SHANNON SUN

There is a radiance in her smile. That flush of joy, caught in the curve of her lips, is almost infectious. And perhaps it is: the same look manifests itself on the faces of all the children and adults behind her—a sizeable, almost intimidating crowd that fades into the otherwise barren background. Their gazes all land on one man. His face is not shown, but his round glasses, hunched shoulders, and muted black uniform already betray his identity. His name is Aaron Feis. He is the football coach who threw himself in front of his students in the mass shooting at Marjory Stonemason Douglas High School in Florida. The gravity of his death, juxtaposed against those delightful smiles, produces an almost jarring effect. But the title of this editorial cartoon, “[Hero’s Welcome](#),” by American artist Pia Guerra—as well as the dialogue bubble in the cartoon: “Come on Mister Feis! So many of us want to meet you!”—transforms that the initial shock into something much more complicated. The crowd represents those killed in mass school shootings. The place, then, symbolizes heaven. I start crying when I see it.

The intensity of emotions I felt was not unique. Across the Internet, the editorial cartoon evoked an enormous public reaction, and the artist Guerra appeared on various mainstream news outlets. A *Washington Post* article by Samantha Schmidt recorded a teacher’s statement: “I saw this earlier, and I sat in front of my students and cried. And then I showed it to them, and they cried, too. Very powerful” (Schmidt). And yet, within a short span of time, the cartoon drew backlash because not a single person of color appeared in the crowd—a representation that contradicts the diverse populations of the victims.

This cartoon, as well as the layered reaction it generated, complicates the existing dialogue on the ethics of representation. In her essay, “Who Gets to Be Human on the Evening News?” Columbia Journalism School professor Alisa Solomon writes of the recurrent trope of “the universal human subject,” a form of representation that “depends on extracting subjects from history, stirring viewers to shed a tear over human torment but not to consider questions of justice” (1587). Aimed at evoking empathy and identification, such representation—as Solomon contends—often confers humanity by “putting ‘innocent victims’ at the center of the stories” (1591). In the case of Guerra’s cartoon, enormous emphasis on the innocent, almost angelic, demeanor of the victims lies at the core of its success. The artistic choice to not depict a single person of color, therefore, bears pernicious implications. In a country that has long equated whiteness with innocence and blackness with criminality, it is hard not to interpret the cartoon as reinforcing racist tropes. After all, the cartoon’s

representation of exclusively white victims invokes the assumption that this racial group alone is innocent and worthy of empathy. By extension, those not depicted—that is to say, all non-white victims—do not fit the mold of “the universal human subject.” Coupled with the over-representation of black criminals in the media landscape, the sole depiction of white victims in Guerra’s artwork carries a striking undertone of racial discrimination. How, then, should we weigh the merits of a piece that advances an important human rights issue at the expense of reinforcing racial stereotypes?

One response may be found in Harvard professor Elaine Scarry’s essay “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People,” a work that likewise explores the framework of representation. First acknowledging the limitations and inherent subjectivity of any attempt at depiction, Scarry speaks of the “imaginative labor of knowing the other,” a conscious act of mobilizing our creative capacity to better understand and empathize (103). In articulating the pitfalls of imagination, Scarry expresses two concerns: a tendency to “typically contemplate the other in the singular” and the troubling consequence that the victim’s fate is “contingent on the generosity and wisdom of the imaginer” (103, 106). Guerra’s cartoon seems to avoid the trap of the first problem by depicting a crowd. However, in reality, it still falls into that same trap, because the group is monochromatic. In terms of race, portraying an all-white crowd defeats the very purpose of invoking the plural. It embodies the same shortcomings as depicting one individual. As a result, Guerra’s artistic choice to treat “the other” as a singular entity conveys a terrifying, albeit implicit, message that white victims alone qualify for imaginative labor. It is only natural, then, that the subsequent empathy, or what Scarry describes as the “generosity and wisdom of the imaginer,” does not extend to people of color (106). In its attempt to depict the sufferings of “the other”—namely white victims of school shootings—the cartoon has, therefore, primed its viewer to create another binary of “us” and “them.” In this case, the mobilization of imagination is not so much marked by its creative potential to generate empathy, but rather by its crippling ability to neglect and exclude.

That very failure to extend empathy to the full spectrum of victims, in fact, lies at the intersection of Solomon and Scarry’s arguments. Whereas Solomon addresses the viewer’s inability to identify with those beyond “the universal human subject,” Scarry pinpoints the pitfalls of only imagining and empathizing with a singular group of victims. Both authors share in the conviction that attention to the particularity of each victim is indispensable. Guerra’s cartoon did not meet this expectation. And yet, although the cartoon failed to acknowledge the entire affected population, it is unfair and misguided to deny the real, visceral reaction it generated in viewers. Those who retweeted Guerra’s cartoon, recorded their emotional response, or vocalized their interpretation come from diverse backgrounds. They represent a wide array of Internet users from different socioeconomic classes, ages, genders, educational backgrounds, and—most definitely—races. Those affected by the cartoon are more than the

“singular” or “universal” or “monochromatic” subjects depicted. They represent a much fuller spectrum than the drawn victims. This very fact, therefore, brings ambiguity to Solomon and Scarry’s logic. Indeed, although the cartoon itself failed to invoke the fullness and diversity of its subjects, how might we reconcile the fact that the viewers, each with multifaceted identities and vested interests, are capable of imagining differently?

A nuanced reading of Solomon and Scarry’s work reveals that both authors, in fact, offer ways to consider this implication. Solomon articulates the current, ongoing practice that our media “takes its cues from the human rights community,” stating that “human rights workers are sources for our stories” (1591). Here, the “human rights community” can be interpreted broadly as all viewers of Guerra’s cartoon who partook in the movement of gun control, fighting—in big or small ways—against the violation of human rights. In participating in this battle, not only did they fight on behalf of all victims, they also brought to the table their own varied identities and concerns. They illuminated the question of race and contested the ethics of representation. This almost collaborative back-and-forth between the artwork and the viewers, therefore, pushes the issue of gun control under the spotlight of intersectionality. The criticism about the cartoon’s failed representation of race, which was recounted in numerous mainstream news outlets, provides concrete evidence of the ways in which human rights advocates become the very “sources for our stories” (1591). Indeed, Scarry insists that human rights activism—and the imaginative labor it mandates—ultimately “recreates us . . . [and] is a lever across which we act on, and continually revise, ourselves” (110). At the heart of Scarry’s argument is an emphasis on continual and collaborative effort. She invokes the vocabulary of “us,” “we,” and “ourselves” to remind us that we must act because we have personal stakes in this shared endeavor (110). After all, Guerra’s cartoon may be flawed in its representation of race, but any attempt at depiction is inadequate and intrinsically biased. It is only the collective decision to contribute to the ongoing discourse—to be conscientious viewers—that makes empathy possible in its fullest form.

Over and over again I read Guerra’s cartoon dialogue bubble: “Come on Mister Feis! So many of us want to meet you!” I begin to realize that the “us” is not only the crowd depicted. That “us” also includes the daunting, enraged mass of Internet users—perhaps a street, a city, or even a continent away—who want to see. We do not have to be depicted within the confines of the page to feel a sharp, visceral pain. That raw reaction already initiates us into the shared fight against human suffering. I must partake in this fight because my multifaceted identity allows me to transform a few more of “them” into “us”; because my imagination adds to our collective capacity for empathy; and because I see, and *want* to see, colors beyond the monochromatic.



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# MEANING FROM MONEY: JEFF KOONS AND THE TAUTOLOGY OF VALUE

RAMSAY EYRE

Can a ten-foot-tall balloon animal possibly be worth \$58.4 million? In November 2013 at Christie's in New York, someone clearly thought so, coughing up that exact amount for Jeff Koons's 1990s-era sculpture *Balloon Dog (Orange)* (Tully). The sale marked a watershed moment for the contemporary art scene, setting what was then the record for the most expensive work of a living artist ever sold (Tully).<sup>1</sup> Not only did it catapult Koons even further into the most-famous-artist-around status that he had arguably occupied for the previous three decades, but it also subjected him and his work to vigorous controversy about how art merits—or doesn't merit—its worth. The *Balloon Dog* itself fits none of the admittedly subjective criteria for “great art” in a traditional sense, being neither poignant, nor incisive, nor meaningful in any readily apparent way (Gemtou). As a result, its high monetary value strikes some viewers as undeserved or even disgraceful.



Arbogast, Charles Rex. “Jeff Koons in front of *Balloon Dog (Orange)*,” 2008, ©AP Photo.

Koons's sculpture is—quite literally—a giant, hollow, stainless steel reproduction of a glossy orange balloon animal, the sort made for children by clowns at carnivals. This is, to repeat, the most expensive artwork sold in an artist's lifetime ever, but it's certainly not the most nuanced: it comes from a creator who “stresses that his work has no hidden meanings” (Galenson 176). If it is not the presence of any meaning that gives art its value in this case, it is instead the complete lack thereof, reveling solely in the sheer audacity of being a balloon dog elevated to the status of art. Understandably, some art enthusiasts view this as downright insulting (Hughes). However, one cannot simply disregard any significance to the work altogether—if someone shelled out that much money for it, there has to be something that gives the work value, or else the basic rules of monetary economics would be upended and shattered. Whatever that

meaningful feature is, though, it is not apparent within the content of the piece itself. The sculpture's unrestrained self-absorption contradicts the idea that worthy art is necessarily meaningful. Rather, the *Balloon Dog's* success demonstrates that a lack of meaning and a high monetary value can coexist.

Koons's work is analogous to another visual medium that's popular, financially lucrative, and not always terribly deep: television. Around the time of *Balloon Dog's* creation, David Foster Wallace wrote that TV had "become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it," because although "television used to point beyond itself . . . today's audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed" (Wallace 160). TV, like Koons's art, was all about itself. In the age of sitcoms in which Wallace was writing, it lacked the smallest effort at pretending it was an authentic portrayal of the real world and its many complexities. It chose a self-aware acceptance of the medium's base entertainment value over genuinely human statements. Moreover, it did this in full recognition of its existence as a money-making enterprise. Wallace argued that viewers themselves knew about this televised emphasis on profitable self-reference and were aware of its dehumanizing implications. Because of the medium's catchy appeal, though, they kept on watching and were unable to look away.

Similarly, Koons's *Balloon Dog* relies on simple, even cheap, thrills to visually engage its audience—it makes no pretensions about being a genuinely human statement. Art enthusiasts may feel a strong expectation to despise the work as an example of unabashed provocation in contemporary art; nevertheless, its saturated color, its childlike subject, its enormous size, and its reflective surface all play important roles in viewers' literal inability to turn away. First, its bright orange color coerces viewers into engaging it. Then, a millisecond later, they see that it is just a giant balloon dog, something they all once held as a child in its regular-sized latex form. Walking closer, they notice themselves in the reflection of the sculpture's glossy surface, perhaps compelling them to take a selfie with it. But then they step back and laugh to themselves, thinking just how pointless and ironic the *Balloon Dog* still seems as a mere object. Despite the work's lack of conceptual meaning, the audience's undeniable initial intrigue indicates the visual and nostalgic magnetism it possesses. The *Balloon Dog* has no intended conceptual motive, other than to be large and colorful and optimistic. It is absent of any philosophical meaning beyond being *itself*—reveling in its own glossy, overwrought, gigantic, expensive, and yet ultimately banal existence, showing that just like TV, in the *Balloon Dog's* case, art doesn't point beyond itself either. (Even if there is an appeal to nostalgia inherent in the *Balloon Dog* as a reminder of the latex animal we all held in our hands as children, this appeal does little to explain how a super-sized steel version of such an object has now become worth \$58.4 million.) Disconnected from any intended conceptual motive or philosophical purpose, it exploits the most basic human reactions towards the bright, shiny objects of childhood—pulling its audience in and holding it hostage.

Critics, the self-proclaimed philosopher-kings of this public mass known as the Audience (or its individual unit, the Viewer), have held Koons's work in moralistic disdain similar to the way Wallace viewed TV. His oeuvre's alleged visual cheapness drew the ire of one of the world's most respected contemporary art critics, the late Robert Hughes, who decided to feature Koons in a BBC series he presented that drew connections between contemporary art and show business (Hughes). If that doesn't already say enough about his view of the artist's work, he wrote in a related article that Koons's art is nothing more than "an extreme and self-satisfied manifestation of the sanctimony that attaches to big bucks" (Hughes). In the absence of any real meaning, Hughes argues, the audience the work wishes to attract consists solely of wealthy collectors attracted by the bold acts of artistic provocateurs. It overtly seeks to feed the hunger of that large and powerful entity called the art market—a dangerous precedent, in Hughes' eyes. He goes on to write: "Koons is the perfect product of an art system in which the market controls nearly everything, including much of what gets said about art" (Hughes). According to Hughes, this system is so powerful that it has the ability not only to dictate the price of a particular work of art, but also to drive a work's most fundamental public perception.

Certainly, the fame the *Balloon Dog* received from its sale serves as testimony to the feasibility of this system's power. We may never be absolutely certain whether or not Jeff Koons is primarily focused on making money when he makes art, but it is irrefutable that the work's high price has become a part of its interpretation. When looking at the sculpture, the viewer knows that it is worth millions. As a result, the piece is inextricably linked to its perception as an *expensive* work of art.

Scott Rothkopf, the chief curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art's prominent 2014 Koons retrospective, chose not to view this connotation in a negative light as Hughes did, but instead as a positive and intellectually intriguing aspect of the work. He wrote of the *Balloon Dog* that "its cold, shiny surfaces seem to condense the hothouse flows of capital and desire that both bring it into being and buoy its movement around the globe" (Rothkopf 29). He effectively concedes that Koons uses the market as a motivation for creativity, but maintains that this is purely a way of creating art that is innovative, original, and—consequently, in his assessment—*good*. "Koons's example is not that of an artist playing to or just riffing on a market," the curator writes, "but of one who in supple ways uses that market to create something that could never have been made before and could now be made only by him" (Rothkopf 29). In this reading, the artist doesn't want to exploit the market for personal fame or wealth, but wants to use it as a tool solely for the sake of his artistic creativity.

There is indeed a cold reality to the omnipresence of economic influence in Koons's artistic process. *Balloon Dog (Orange)* is only one of a number of balloon dog sculptures that the artist produced between the years 1994 and 2000, all of which would be identical were it not for the fact that each was produced in a different color.

They were also crafted as part of a larger collection of work he called his “Celebration series,” which sounds like it could be anything from a fashion line to a limited edition of plastic cups (Sischy). This categorization of the work as part of a larger collection signifies a type of organization to Koons’s artistic production, reminiscent of a large company’s branding strategy. What’s more is that almost none of Koons’s works, never mind just the *Balloon Dog* sculptures, are produced from his own hand. He has a team of well over a hundred assistants, operating out of a factory-like studio, which constructs the sculptures based off of the artist’s designs and ideas (Sischy). Koons has evidently defined his artistic role as similar to that of a creative CEO driving the development of a luxury brand. He delegates the execution of his work to technicians, categorizes his works like products, and attempts to make each one as visually attractive as possible. This art-industrial complex simply wouldn’t be possible for Koons to have at his fingertips without the high monetary value the market puts on works like the *Balloon Dog*.

Before one deems this an unusually self-serving means of artistic production, though, the reality is that this isn’t even close to the first time that market forces have driven an artwork’s creation. Rembrandt and Rubens willingly catered to the needs of their wealthy Dutch patrons. Reviewer Bart Cornelis elucidates this when he writes that “many of the [art market] mechanisms at play in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are not very different from those of today” (Cornelis). Indeed, wealthy religious and political institutions have driven the creation of works of art even extending back into ancient history, with Pericles’ financial patronage of the Parthenon and its associated artworks being just one example (Kallet-Marx). Economics have *always* been a consideration in the creation of art, because the marketplace has been the main arbiter of which art stands up as more significant in its time than the rest. It is difficult to argue, though, that Koons’s *Balloon Dog* possesses the deep humanism of a Rembrandt portrait or the masterful technicality of a Michelangelo sculpture. The *Balloon Dog* revels in this market success, as it is likely that these earlier works did as well—however, it does very little conceptually to encourage this success. How is it, then, that this work is considered so enormously valuable?

Just before the *Balloon Dog* went up for auction, the critic and scholar Jonathan Neil argued that the work’s meaning is found within its very status as an economic asset. Echoing Cornelis’s assertion of economic influence throughout art history, Neil makes the case that this is not an uncommon characterization of how art can manifest itself, either today or into the past. He defends the *Balloon Dog*’s high estimated value, arguing that:

Even when works of art were not selling for many millions of dollars, they were assets . . . wishing it weren’t so, dismissing the language . . . or continuing to trot out classical or eighteenth-century aesthetic theories of art’s purity or

non-utility are examples of intellectual laziness and blinkered thinking. Art is many things, and an asset is one of them. (43)

He claims that this characterization of art as being fundamentally concerned with its economic value doesn't merely *apply to* Koons's *Balloon Dog*, but in fact gives the work its central meaning. Like many other products in our marketplace economy, it has been given importance through its price tag. That the work sold for more than any other by a living artist is not just an intriguing fact about the piece's backstory, or an inevitable part of the audience's perception of the work—it is an essential and integral part of the art itself reflective of the world around it. If the monetary value of the art is indeed part of the work, it is precisely this that grants it its substantive value.

Herein we glimpse the source of the *Balloon Dog's* worth: The fact that it is worth so much monetarily is the reason why it has such immense value. *It is expensive because it is expensive.* This confounding tautology not only reinforces the idea of the piece's ironic existence, but it also gives this irony a reason for existing. (There's another tautology for you.) When looking at the object, the viewer can simultaneously engage with its lack of conceptual commentary and its high value, and then arrive at the understanding that through its value, it creates a sort of commentary within itself. It is easy to take this conclusion and condemn Koons's work for it, but to do so immediately would be to ignore the valuable lessons of this work's revelations about the art market and our social economy.

The cause-and-effect relationship between money and meaning as exemplified by the *Balloon Dog* has the power to frustrate and enrage many viewers, but it reveals how art is not immune to the forces of a market economy such as ours, whether one likes it or not. Though it may not make a normative argument of its own about this relationship, the work is itself illustrative of our age of hyper-saturation and relentless self-marketing just in its plain existence. *It is a product.* Its very point is that it captivates our attention, and that we then laugh. We know it's trying to fool us, just like TV; we are the well-trained "Audience" that Wallace was talking about. But we keep looking, and wealthy collectors gobble it up. Whether or not the *Balloon Dog* falls under the name of *great art* is totally irrelevant—it may be brilliant, or it may be pathetic. What matters is the objective fact that people look—they look, and then, if wealthy and passionate enough, they buy.

This puts the work squarely into territory that many critical viewers consider to be quintessential of American culture. No matter how high a price we place on an object like the *Balloon Dog*, it ultimately remains hollow in both concept and physical substance. Hughes, who is so critical of Koons, cannot go without conceding that "you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him" (Hughes). It exemplifies the idea of our nation as a consumerist inferno, filled with flashy advertisements and a hedonistic emphasis on money, power, sex, and, in this case, balloon dogs. Commentators have always criticized how America is connoted as much

by this relentless consumerism as by its idealized freedom, and Wallace in particular considered this hedonism as manifested in TV to be dangerous (Wallace). Koons, on the other hand, refrains from criticizing that connotation or explicitly using his work to comment on it at all, and instead embraces it as an unavoidable reality of today's society.

The repulsion some feel towards the *Balloon Dog* reveals how we have grown accustomed to romanticizing the idealized notion of the independent, free-willed artist. True visionaries, we say, are those who make powerful and beautiful art of their own accord with absolutely no consideration for their work's profitability. In our condemnation of the *Balloon Dog*, though, we are negating the fact that this idealized notion has never existed entirely, and will never exist, because art is not priceless. People value it, and it carries economic weight, no matter what higher realm it is supposed to occupy. Koons's work makes this contention as forcefully as it can in the act of its existence, with its identity intended not as an expressive or inherently meaningful piece of art, but as a shiny luxury good to be bought and sold. Some viewers may be troubled by the societal conditions that fueled this work's creation, but within that internal frustration is exactly how the piece's existence is significant. We should understand the *Balloon Dog* as an object that communicates the all-powerful market forces that have governed art since the beginning, and for that we should see it as an important and valuable work in the ongoing conversation around the ethics of our consumerist, wealth-driven culture.

#### NOTE

1. In November 2018, David Hockney's painting *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* surpassed it at the same auction house, maxing out at \$90.3 million (Scott).

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# everything is a meme – rupi kaur

WAN YII LEE



The image on the left is a post on Instagram, made by poet Rupi Kaur. The post features one of her illustrated poems, selected from her book of poetry *milk and honey*, accompanied by a single hashtag (#love) as its caption. These words, short and simple, have racked up 7,574 likes (as of 12/3/2017), followed by hundreds of comments in which fans tag their friends, claiming “the feels are so real” and “this is deep” (Kaur). Kaur’s Instagram page is filled with such posts, alternating between posts of her poetry and pictures of herself. On top of millions of followers behind her (and zero on her following count), her published book *milk and honey* has become a New York Times Bestseller poetry collection, which is “almost unheard of for a first-time writer, let alone a first-time poet” (Walker). This has garnered attention for the 25-year-old, born in Punjab, India, and raised in Canada. She is even dubbed an “Instapoet,” a label that refers to her catapult to publishing fame through the use of social media (Qureshi). Her popularity and charismatic presence are indisputable, even reaching levels of worship; journalist Rob Walker observes that fans fall “under her spell” during her poetry performances (Walker).

In contrast, the image on the right is from the Columbia University meme page on Facebook, one of many university pages in which students post relatable content about common experiences in university life. A recent trend has been the Rupi Kaur meme, which involves editing pages from Rupi Kaur’s poetry collection to suit another context (“Milk and Honey Parodies”). In the specific example above, it has changed

the poem's subject to the common experience of overworked fatigue at the university library. Many others have hopped onto the bandwagon, creating memes by reworking Kaur's simple words, or just by writing their own randomly enjambed verses and signing off with the trademark "- rupi kaur" at the end. While her popularity as an Instapoet continues to soar, memes continue to emerge that caustically mimic her art. Why has the verse from such an acclaimed poet on Instagram also been used as fodder for memes on the Internet? Understanding these seemingly divergent trends on social media requires us to delve into why Kaur's poetry was so popular in the first place.

The nature of Kaur's popularity is so unprecedented that it has even caught the attention of the press, reaching the ranks of *The Economist*, an esteemed magazine-format newspaper that publishes on current affairs but also comments on culture. Due to Kaur's rise to stardom, it states,

Poetry is in the midst of a renaissance, and is being driven by a clutch of young, digitally-savvy "Instapoets", so-called for their ability to package their work into concise, shareable posts. ("Rupi Kaur Reinvents Poetry").

It explains Kaur's popularity as a re-birth of the genre of poetry itself, now coming in a "package" that is short and, more importantly, can be shared. It is "shareable" because poets like Kaur are able to "articulate emotions that readers struggle to make sense of" ("Rupi Kaur Reinvents Poetry"). Indeed, Kaur's poem exhibited above articulates what she felt when leaving an unhealthy relationship: "i left cause the / longer i stayed the less / i loved myself." And clearly, this resonates with thousands of people, seen in the number of likes and shares. This can be seen even in a book review of *milk and honey*, which states: "A poem by Kaur that reads 'fall / in love / with your solitude' is immediately digestible" (French). Concise, digestible, shareable—these adjectives show that what readers love about Kaur's poetry is how universally accessible it is.

*The Economist* article also highlights Kaur's accompanying illustrations to her poems, which are the aesthetic part of her Instapoet "package." An example is the minimalist line drawing of the huddled-up girl that illustrates the struggle described in the poem above. Kaur herself is very aware of this concept of a "package"; when asked about her illustrations, she called it "a very Apple way of doing things," a way to "make the branding so strong that people will be able to recognize that this is a Rupi poem without having the name there" ("Rupi Kaur Reinvents Poetry"). Although the quality of her poems will always be contentious because it is a subjective matter, one thing is clear: Kaur is very conscious about "branding" her poetry as an accessible "package" that is "shareable," and, to a large extent, she has evidently succeeded in selling it.

Not only has she branded her poetry, but she has also branded herself. Never failing to emphasize her origins as an immigrant from Punjab and a woman of color, Kaur makes it part of her public persona to represent the struggles of minority groups, even

basing some of her poetry on this experience (Walker; Manosh). Still, her social media remains a site of positive determination through her difficult struggles, as seen in a recent video on Instagram where she converses with Sophie Trudeau, a gender-equality activist, on the topic of healing (Trudeau). One marketing and sociological study might label this a perfect example of the “underdog effect” (Paharia et al. 775). Through extensive research, the study managed to confirm the effectiveness of brand profiles which highlighted the factors of “(1) external disadvantage and (2) passion and determination” in increasing brand loyalty (Paharia et al. 776). It is clear that Kaur does not just accept being the underdog but even basks in it; when asked about the controversy she stirs among established members of the literary community, she cheekily says: “I don’t fit into the age, race or class of a bestselling poet” (Walker). There have been those from the “establishment,” i.e., the traditional literary world of publishing, who criticize the craft behind her poetry (or lack thereof), but Kaur nonchalantly responds: “Good art will always break boundaries, and that’s what the gatekeepers are also seeing” (French). Taking a note from marketing tips and tricks, Kaur has successfully applied the “underdog effect” to its maximum potential, even using it to shield her from literary criticism of the “establishment.”

This seemingly impenetrable shield relies on a rather problematic logic, as Chiara Giovanni, a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Stanford University, points out. In an opinion piece on BuzzFeed, she observes that when critics attempt to criticize Kaur for artificiality, it is often rebuked by fans and Kaur herself in the name of authenticity. When that happens,

it becomes impossible to discuss Kaur’s work in a way that goes beyond the existing dichotomy of vapidness versus raw honesty—and, as the moral high ground will always favor those who point to emotional authenticity over cynics who call the poet ‘corny,’ this display of unpretentious openness ultimately benefits Kaur. (Giovanni)

She therefore possesses a trump card: “authenticity.” This is the ultimate, unfalsifiable selling point to her brand. No matter the actual quality of her poems, nobody can disprove the genuineness of Kaur’s emotions in her work, except Kaur herself. The “establishment” and all her critics just look like more forces trying to put her down, but what she is selling is a story of her rising above them in an anti-establishment way. The most ingenious marketing move has turned any opposition into more ammunition.

Yet this can also be the key to understanding how anti-establishment her work truly is. Aarthi Vadde, a scholar of English literature, has written about the effect of the digital publishing scene on contemporary literature, specifically on how it has lowered the barrier to entry and allowed amateurs to enter the scene (27). However, she makes clear that she does not see the undercutting of the “establishment” as democratizing

by making it accessible to the public. Instead, she states that the “public sphere . . . [is] an always already commercialized, industrialized, and pluralized space”—in other words, the public sphere can be seen as another sort of establishment, only with a different set of rules (29). These rules are determined by the modern “sharing economy” of today, where a commodity’s value is now dependent on how “shareable” it is among an audience (30). If it appeals to the masses and is worth sharing among people, it becomes more visible and valued; if it’s unpopular, it automatically dies away. And as *The Economist* points out, being “shareable” is indeed a key feature of Kaur’s Instapoetry, a commodity that is meticulously branded and packaged for success in such a world. For all her impenetrable underdog rhetoric, Kaur’s navigation of the world of social media reveals itself as a strategy pandering to another establishment, that of populism in the “sharing economy.”

This is where the meme comes in. The first conception of the notion of a meme comes from Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. He raised the idea of the “meme,” a cultural unit (or idea) that selfishly seeks replication for its own survival in a competition to infect minds as vehicles for that replication, much like a gene does in biological evolution (206). At the time, he was referring to ideas such as slogans, fashion, slang phrases, and so on (206). Today, the word has been appropriated to refer to a specific genre of online communication that involves “remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation,” as defined by Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, scholars of media communication (1886). This “participatory digital culture” refers to our online culture with relatively low barriers to entry in terms of participation, creation, and sharing. It is this overall culture that is home to the “memescape,” i.e., “the virtual, mental, and physical realms that produce, reproduce, and consume Internet memes” (1891, 1893). Wiggins and Bowers specifically argue for seeing memes as “artifacts of participatory digital culture” in order to underscore the aspects of production and consumption involved in the life of a meme (1891). We can see how the exhibited example fits such a definition of an online meme. Produced by a member of the digital participatory community of the Columbia meme page, the meme performs “remixing” by replacing the words “stopped loving you” in the original poem with “finished my homework” and adding a fictive title—“Butler Library”—while leaving the rest of the image the same. It is consumed by other members of this community, who give it likes and tag their friends in the comments, thus rapidly sharing it in conversation.

But many fail to make memes with that “shareable” quality, so what makes the Rupi Kaur meme actually successful? According to *Know Your Meme*, a comprehensive online catalogue of memes, some online users who did not like her poetry created the Kaur meme as a parody; it was an intentional statement about Kaur’s poetry itself (“Milk and Honey’ Parodies”). This resembles Greenpeace’s “Let’s Go!” Arctic meme campaign, which some communication scholars use as an example of using memetic

irony as “delegitimizing discourse” (Davis, Glantz and Novak 62). By mimicking and mocking the corporate speak of Shell, an oil company with Arctic oil drilling plans, Greenpeace successfully unseated Shell as an institution within their memes, making Shell’s image go from well-polished to ridiculous (77). Similarly, anyone who makes a Rupi Kaur meme is cleverly circumventing the unresolvable “vapidity versus raw honesty” debate (as raised by Giovanni). They instead use the meme to pointedly “delegitimize” her as the emblem of Instapoetry and the ruthlessly populist “sharing economy” where value is equated with shareability. The memes mimic the brevity, transparency, and truism of her verses to highlight precisely those qualities. From looking authentic and profound, the poetry now appears pretentious and shallow, generically applicable to any situation, such as doing homework in Butler Library. Even the illustrated image now instead resembles an emotionally exaggerated mock-up of a student dramatically succumbing to desperation in a fetal position. The meme works as a way for members of the participatory digital community to humorously “delegitimize” the institutions that Rupi Kaur represents.

In fact, the communication genre of memes is uniquely apt as a mode of response to Kaur’s products. Using the case study of the Qin meme on Taobao, researchers Junhua Wang and Hua Wang identified some criteria for memes to successfully spread and survive, a key one being “simplicity” (270). This feature made the Qin meme easy to replicate and be quickly understood by users (Wang and Wang 270). So if Kaur’s poetry is branded as uniquely personal and profound, what does it say when it also functions as a successful meme, whose success is fueled by simplicity? The meme is a befitting response because the magnitude of its own popularity is a subversive testament to the thinly veiled simplicity of the original content. Using the genre of memes to subvert populist institutions bears its own ironic aptness, given that memes themselves also depend on their “shareability” as “artifacts,” or products, for survival. Indeed, while analyzing how the Rupi Kaur memes are a digitally savvy way of criticizing the original content, we cannot forget that even memes are no exception to the populist institutions that the Rupi Kaur meme indirectly mocks. The Rupi Kaur meme therefore does not solely delegitimize Kaur’s poetry while obnoxiously legitimizing itself and the people behind it on an intellectual or cultural high ground—in fact, it makes an ironic, self-deprecatory statement about how every cog in the machinery of “shareability,” both Kaur’s poetry and the meme genre included, should be critically inspected in this light.

This ironic self-deprecation is apt because it is precisely “the impasse between the authentic and the ironic” that lies at the heart of Internet culture, according to Jonathan L. Zittrain, current director of Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and author of books on the subject of the Internet (392). He gives the example of a player in *World of Warcraft* who had died in real life, leading to a virtual wake for her character in the game held by her online guild of friends, only for them to be virtually massacred by another guild as a joke (392). While seemingly unethical

or unnecessary, the virtual massacre ironically used the game to reveal another authentic truth, the fact that people take the game itself far too seriously. Likewise, the Rupī Kaur meme toes that fine line between authenticity and irony. While ironically using a shareable meme to call out the populist institutions behind Kaur’s poetry, the attempt at authenticity is embedded in its denouncement of valuation based on “shareability,” even while the meme itself isn’t any more profound or less dependent on “shareability” than the original poem. Lying on the line between irony and authenticity, the meme is not simply “delegitimizing” Kaur’s poetry while holding itself on a pedestal above populism; it stands as a self-evident and self-aware product of a world in which anything only has value when it is “shareable,” including the meme itself, thus reflecting our culture for what it is.

Further iterations of the meme down the reproduction chain only show it getting hyperbolically extended to exponential levels of absurdity, as seen in the exhibits provided on *Know Your Meme* (an elegant example of which would be “i shoved a whole / bag of jellybeans / up my ass”) (“Milk and Honey’ Parodies”). Although seemingly irrelevant, the absurdity that memes tend towards may yet prove to be an indicator of a generational malaise. French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus once identified the absurd as “born of this confrontation between the human need [for happiness and reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world,” and it would be this gap of meaninglessness that made suicide the most pertinent philosophical question (20). Although existentialism is not new in the twenty-first century, the rampant absurdity in meme culture could be indicative of the fact that memes are a channel through which the digital generation deals with their unanswered calls for “happiness and reason,” or, in other words, meaning in life. Elizabeth Bruenig, an essayist on religion, politics, and culture, seems to agree that this is a budding language among youths today; she even dubs the trend “millennial surrealism,” referencing the surrealist trend of the previous century, but calls it a “digital update” in the language of millennials. Through hyperbolic and absurdist memes, young consumers use their digitally native tongues to humorously deal with their struggle to find meaning in a more chaotic, postmodern world (Bruenig). Rupī Kaur’s poetry and the populist institutions that enable her success are symptoms of such a world. The memes that parody her are a coping mechanism for the anxiety generated when “authenticity” can be simply used as a populist trump card and where “shareability” is the new absolute benchmark of value. When one’s value and existence is now so blatantly premised on being liked and shared, it is hard to blame youths for fretting over whether independent authenticity and meaning exist at all. What better way to express this generation-wide anxiety than through a medium that is self-deprecatory, but also, in a relieving way, self-aware?

The trends of Rupī Kaur’s continuously rising popularity and the spread of memes parodying her poetry are, therefore, not actually surprising. Rather than seeing them as trends that diverge, it would be more accurate to conceptualize them as parallel, fueled by the same undercurrent of “shareability” in a cultural world shaped by

evolutionary memetic logic as first conceived by Dawkins, i.e., that only the most “shareable” can reproduce and survive. This makes her truly deserve the title of being a poet “for the social media generation,” as *The Economist* claimed, but in more ways than one—while raved about by fans who feel good consuming her effective brand, her poetry also makes for perfect meme fodder in today’s digital participatory culture, as a sophisticated statement of self-deprecatory absurdity. In such an Internet age, where one is virtually surrounded by swaths of content like Kaur’s as well as absurdist memes and everything in between, one can only wonder what it really means to exist and be truly “authentic.” But perhaps this question is, in fact, a perennial one that has been fundamental to being part of any social culture at all, only now renewed in the language of the digitally native.

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## WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO MARRY A WHITE GUY?

SALLY JEE

**B**ut Sally, wouldn't you want to marry a white guy?" I froze. It was a Saturday afternoon, and my friend and I were passing a bag of chips back and forth, talking about boys. Correction: *she* talked about boys, and *I* listened. When she told me that a white boy from our English class seemed interested in me, I replied that I wasn't into dating white men. What I really meant was that I wasn't into men. But at the age of fourteen, I was unsure of myself and unable to fully grasp the various identities that crisscrossed my being. That was when she dropped the bomb: "But Sally, wouldn't you want to marry a white guy?"

I muttered something about being uninterested in marriage, and the moment passed. Her question, however, haunts me to this day. While my fourteen-year-old self was vaguely offended but unable to pinpoint the offense, I can now define what hurt me then and continues to affect me as an Asian woman in the U.S. My white friend, perhaps unconsciously, made two assumptions about me: first, that I am heterosexual, and second, that I belong with a white man.

My friend's assumptions seem to have stemmed from the popular stereotype that Asian women are passive love interests of white heterosexual men (Lee 117). Having grown up in an all-white community, my friend had only seen Asians as minor characters in television and film before meeting me. It seems likely, then, that she internalized these media images, which often perpetuate passive stereotypes of Asian women by representing us as some variation of the "Lotus Blossom Baby" trope: the Oriental figure who is hyper-feminine, delicate, and submissive to men (Tajima 309). This Oriental woman is without a voice to express her own desires, as her speech is a "nonlanguage—that is, uninterpretable chattering, pidgin English, giggling, or silence" (309). So, in the rare occasion that she speaks, the white man does not, and need not, understand. Her wants and desires, unheard, are therefore nonexistent, and she exists only to satisfy his sexual fantasies. In the image of the "Lotus Blossom Baby," racism and sexism intersect: the Asian woman, a racial other, submits herself—sexually and otherwise—to white patriarchy.

This convergence of racism and sexism leads to the invisibility of us queer Asian women. Just as my friend assumed that I could not be anything other than a heterosexual who wants to marry a white man, those of us who do not fit the Lotus Blossom mold are rendered nonexistent. "[P]eople see me . . . as somebody who should be with a white man. Which means I'm heterosexual. Which means I can't possibly want . . . my own [Asian] sisters," says an Asian-American woman who considers herself a lesbian, in an interview with queer studies scholar JeeYeun Lee (119). Her identity as a woman who desires co-ethnic women is obscured by

stereotypes of Asian femininity: since Lotus Blossoms are objects of white male desire, the public has a hard time imagining us as people who embody sexualities unsubordinated to white men. Even queer communities do not seem immune to the Lotus Blossom image. According to Richard Fung, Asian female faces are almost never represented in images produced by mainstream gay and lesbian organizations (237). In other words, the various sexual identities that we possess are unrecognized, not only in mainstream society, but also in queer spaces, perhaps because of the notion that we belong with—and exist for—white men.

As a woman and a feminist, I am sometimes tempted to sideline my race to identify with a collective women's struggle against sexism. I am, however, also aware that in many of my non-Asian peers' minds, stereotypes of my gender *and* Asian heritage come together to erase my queer identity. Perhaps the only way to start deconstructing these stereotypes, then, is to acknowledge the intersectional oppression that we queer Asian women face and reject feminism that focuses only on gender. "There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist," says Audre Lorde in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." As Lorde points out, there is no universal narrative of female oppression: each woman's race and sexuality—among other identities—converge to create a unique experience of her womanhood. So, each woman's strategy of resistance must also be unique. Though I could not come up with a satisfactory comeback to my friend's question that day, I now start *my* resistance by saying, clearly and emphatically: "No, I would not want to marry a white guy."

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# WHEN EVEN EDUCATION, MONEY, AND STATUS CAN'T SAVE YOU

ASATTA MESA

There are some who believe that the physical threat of racism has dematerialized, that we live in a 'post-racial' country, that the imminent danger faced by black and brown people every day is a product of individual experience rather than systemic oppression. And yet, despite such opinion, the facts tell a different story. Racism is adversely affecting the African-American community in the most physical and primal way possible: it is tampering with generational reproduction.

According to a [2018 study conducted by Duke University](#), the black Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) in the United States is about 11.2 per 1000 live births, roughly twice that of the white IMR. More disconcerting, the most educated black women are the ones facing the greatest risk of infant and maternal mortality. In fact, black women with doctorates and professional degrees have a higher IMR than white women who never finished high school.

Yes, that is correct. The pursuit of a post-bachelor's degree can actually hinder, rather than help, black women; elevated levels of academic success can lead to heightened risk for both African-American mothers and their babies. It is not only highly educated African-American women who are adversely affected, but many other exceptionally successful women as well. Consider Serena Williams's pregnancy complications, for instance. According to [a 2018 Vogue article by Rob Haskell](#), Ms. Williams delivered her baby via emergency C-section after experiencing an alarming heart rate drop. After her daughter Olympia was safely delivered, Serena began experiencing excruciating pain. She immediately assumed that it was a pulmonary embolism, given her experience with blood clots, and informed the hospital staff. They did not believe her, and instead administered an ultrasound. She was forced to demand a CT scan, at which point her medical staff found blood clots that posed a significant health risk. What followed was a series of additional medical complications, including the discovery of a large hematoma that flooded her abdomen. One of the most accomplished women in the world faced severe health risks and lost crucial time with her newborn daughter due to complications that she foresaw, but which her medical staff did not immediately address. And she is far from being alone in having faced these complications. Williams's case begs a reconsideration of how African-American female health is treated in this country.

The inverse correlation between success (academic or otherwise) and pregnancy risk defies normative conceptions of the protection provided by upper-class membership. Why, then, does the black/white infant mortality gap exist? [According to the Duke study](#), it may be the increased stress experienced by professional women

in the workplace that is to blame for the chasm. Evidence shows that being the sole African-American woman in professional environments where racism still persists often takes a heavy toll on women. Perceived discrimination is generally linked to increased levels of inflammation and elevated blood pressure, which can have a negative impact on both babies and mothers during pregnancy.

Yet this study still leaves some unanswered questions. One would think that the stresses experienced by low-income women, such as economic uncertainty and circumstantial pressure, would be even more consequential than the stresses induced by professional racism. So, is stress the only factor to blame for this situation? Another factor to be considered is the unwillingness of physicians to properly respond to women of color due to their belief in the illegitimacy of black expertise (as occurred with Williams). The notion that African-Americans lack the ability to understand their own bodies indicates that a frightening belief in the intrinsic ineptitude of black people still exists. *This* may explain why education and status cannot make African-American women immune to inequality; their achievements will never be equated to those of their white counterparts.

The fact that stress and racist medical responses may be to blame for these statistics demonstrates just how deep the tendrils of racism have been dug in the African-American community. It confirms that the ‘American’ identity is disparate, with [some people experiencing](#) health benefits similar to New Zealand’s, while others live an experience similar to that of mothers in lower-income nations like Thailand, Romania, and Grenada. Furthermore, it subverts the argument that African-Americans can use education and access as a means to transcend the oppressive confines of racism. Pregnancy risk does not discriminate when threatening black women. Educated or uneducated, wealthy or low-income, all black women are at risk. The ‘pick yourself up by the bootstraps’ argument that is so carelessly employed by many of America’s political elite becomes negated once you look at the facts: it is the very access which African-Americans are encouraged to strive for that is posing the greatest threat to black women.

While the narrative of African-American oppression is largely dominated by the unjust violence inflicted upon men within the community, the suffering experienced by women warrants equal attention. Women have served as pillars of support and hope in the African-American community, but their needs have taken a secondary role to those of the men behind whom they so ardently stand. The very livelihood of African-American mothers and children needs to start being of greater importance.

Women should never have to choose between educational and professional advancement, and the right to life and safe reproduction. This should especially hold true in the United States of America. As a black woman, who knows plenty of black women, I was frightened and shocked when I learned about this research. As an individual who attends a top-tier university, and who is headed down a high-level career path, the stress of being the sole black woman in a room and among my

colleagues is a given. The fact that this inalienable anxiety might determine the future to which I have access is very unnerving.

Without mothers we are nothing, and without equal reproductive rights we cannot spawn new generations as symbols of promise and change. The African-American access to reproductive rights must be further researched and addressed, before generational effects become irreversible. Let's re-center the focus of our battle for equality.

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